SPECIAL EatingWell EDITION

EATING FOR Happiness

The Gut-Mind Connection • Intuitive Eating Dining Together • The Joy of Indulgence

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Happiness

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INTRODUCTION

A RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS?

Many ingredients may play a part, including how we live—and what we eat.

BY JOYCE HENDLEY

We all know intuitively what happiness feels like: being satisfied with our present state, feeling content with ourselves, experiencing enjoyment, being in a good mood. But a specific definition of happiness is harder to pinpoint. Psychologists might define it with phrases like "subjective well-being" or "positive emotions," or as the lack of negative psychological symptoms, such as depression or anxiety.

"Happiness depends on ourselves," wrote Aristotle, who posited that it's a central purpose of human life, as well as a goal in itself. Happiness isn't simply pleasure or feeling good in the moment. Doing something that makes us happy can sometimes be frustrating or difficult (consider the often trying time spent learning an activity that is ultimately satisfying—say, playing the violin or skiing). Rather, Aristotle said, happiness is the activity of the soul in pursuing what he called "virtuous" activities, such as practicing courage, justice, generosity, and self-control.

The Declaration of Independence famously puts a premium on happiness, declaring "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as a citizen's inalienable rights, which the government will protect. Pursuit may be an apt word. Achieving happiness is an active process—it doesn't just happen. We can cultivate it in the way we live our lives. "Strive to be happy," says Max Ehrmann's influential poem "Desiderata."

It's never too late to cultivate happiness. It's available at any age. In fact, studies show that older adults tend to be happier. For example, a Pew Research Center report, *Growing Old in America: Expectations vs. Reality,* found that adults ages 65 and up felt pretty good about their lives, with more time for hobbies and interests, family, and volunteer work, and regarded themselves as well respected, financially secure, and less stressed

than their younger counterparts. So how do we strive for more happiness in our lives? Here are a few tried-and-true ways.

INCREASING OUR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS through learning keeps us challenged and helps us feel more self-empowered and confident, contributing to our overall happiness. We also feel more resilient and gain a broader view of the world. For example, a recent study at San Francisco State University found that people who engage in formal education experience greater happiness and life satisfaction overall.

Similarly, trying something new—exposing ourselves to a novel experience, whether it's visiting a museum or trying an unfamiliar cuisine—can also make us happier. In a recent study reported in *Nature Neuroscience,* researchers used geolocation technology to track the movements of 122 people across New York City and Miami over a four-month period. When they analyzed participants' movement patterns and compared them with their self-reported emotions, they found that those who regularly engaged in new and diverse experiences were more likely to report positive feelings such as happy, excited, strong, relaxed, and attentive.

Nourishing our body and brain with delicious and wholesome foods is another path to happiness. Eating is one of life's greatest pleasures, and the foods we eat connect us to our families and roots, keeping us emotionally grounded and content. Certain foods, such as omega-3-rich fatty fish and vegetables or folate-rich dark leafy greens, contain nutrients that support a healthy brain. And when we eat a variety of foods, particularly vegetables and fruits, we help maintain a healthy balance of flora in our "other brain": our gastrointestinal (GI) tract. The brain and GI tract are intimately connected, and our emotions—happy, sad, excited, anxious—can trigger symptoms in the gut as well.

Being physically active can boost our mood, of course, and may even make us happier overall. A recent review of 23 studies that looked at mood and physical activity in more than 500,000 participants found that people who worked out at least once a week, even for as little as 10 minutes a day, tended to be happier than those who didn't exercise.

Any type of physical activity seemed to be beneficial, from walking to yoga to swimming. Studies also show that people who are regularly active tend to have lower risks of developing depression and anxiety than nonexercisers. How exercise exerts its happiness-promoting magic isn't completely clear, but it's possible that improved blood flow to the brain and other organs, more energy, more self-confidence, and the social interaction of meeting others for a walk or workout may be factors.

HELPING OTHERS ALSO BRINGS US HAPPINESS. There's evidence that altruism is hardwired in the brain, and that it brings us pleasure to do good for others. In fact, giving activates the same areas of brain that are stimulated by food and sex. According to a study in *Social Science & Medicine*, a person who volunteers weekly is, on average, 16 percent more likely to report being "very happy" than one who volunteers only monthly or less.

People who make a habit of counting their blessings—whether taking the time to appreciate a wonderful meal or letting a friend know how much they're appreciated—tend to be happier, too. And science continues to uncover connections: Recently, researchers at Indiana University surveyed 300 college students who were seeking mental health counseling. In addition to getting counseling, the students were randomly assigned to three groups. One group was instructed to write one letter of gratitude to another person each week for three weeks, the second group was asked to write about their negative experiences, and the third group did not do any writing activity. The researchers found that the participants who wrote gratitude letters reported significantly better mental health one to three months after the writing exercise ended.

"Happiness is a choice" is the oft-repeated maxim. However true that is or isn't, it's clear that our daily choices can greatly influence our overall contentedness. Every decision that brings us more happiness can also make us feel healthier, more connected, more resilient, and—as Aristotle might have put it—closer to fulfilling our life's purpose. ●

CHAPTER 1

SCIENCE OF HAPPY EATING

A wealth of research-backed evidence shows that the foods you eat, and sometimes the way you eat them, can boost your mood.

CAN YOU EAT YOUR WAY TO HAPPY?

Inside the delicious science of piling your plate for better moods.

BY LISA LOMBARDI

If you've ever found joy in a bite of a perfectly ripe peach or felt hangry after skipping lunch, then you know that eating (or not) impacts your mood. But you may not even realize all the ways our everyday diet shapes our emotional state. Happiness doesn't come just from eating things that are super delicious when you're famished—it also comes from eating more healthfully. "When you eat better, you feel better," says Annemarie Ng, RD, a registered dietitian at Stony Brook Medicine. "I have worked with many clients who are shocked by how much better they feel when they begin increasing healthy foods and reducing processed ones."

Taking it a step further, your exact mix of nutrients, style of eating, and baggage around eating can play a big role in whether your meals and snacks help you feel content or leave you irritated and drained. There's also a growing body of evidence that the microbes in our gut can impact our emotional health. What's more, tweaking our food choices may improve or even help stave off depression and anxiety.

Are there guaranteed great-mood foods? Is it possible to cut carbs and still feel chipper? What's the science on eating for emotional health? Read on for the latest thinking and insider strategies for building a feel-good diet.

Consider the Big (Eating) Picture

Do you find yourself grabbing a muffin here, snacking on a bag of pita chips there, and ordering an UberEats burrito from the couch? Everyone reaches for convenience foods now and then, especially when life gets extra hectic. But if you're falling into a groove that has you on a steady diet of packaged convenience foods, you may be missing out on the mind-boosting benefits of a cleaner diet. "The typical American diet is mostly made up of foods that negatively affect mental

health and is devoid of the healthy foods that nourish our brains and—maybe more important—our gut bacteria," says Kaleigh McMordie, RDN, a dietitian in Abilene, Texas.

Researchers are finding that a cleaner diet has mind-boosting benefits. One meta-analysis published in *Psychiatry Research* found that a Mediterranean or Nordic-style diet—high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, olive oil, and fish—is associated with a lower risk of depression, while a Western-style red meat–heavy diet is associated with a higher risk. And a little can go a long way. Simply adding some produce to your existing diet can have a big impact on your well-being, according to Ng, who is also the comanager of the Stony Brook Heights Rooftop Farm, which grows produce for Stony Brook University Hospital patients and local charities. She cites a study out of New Zealand that looked at the fruit and vegetable consumption of young adults. Two groups were observed for two weeks. One group stuck to their typical diet, while the intervention group received two additional fruit and vegetable servings a day over their usual intake. The study looked at depressive symptoms, anxiety, negative mood, positive mood, vitality, and flourishing, and it found that only the people who received the additional fruit and vegetables showed improvements in psychological well-being.

Seriously: Don't Skip Meals

One of the most basic ways to feel upbeat is to eat, period. "Undereating makes you feel weak and tired, even light-headed or not able to think as clearly," says Bonnie Taub-Dix, RDN, the author of *Read It Before You Eat It*. This happens because of both low blood sugar and not having enough fuel for your body and brain. Missing your morning meal may be particularly problematic, according to a 2019 study. It found that breakfast skippers were more likely to suffer from mood disorders than breakfast eaters.

Sometimes we go without meals because we have too much to do and it feels more efficient. But this strategy backfires, cautions Taub-Dix: "If you're not fueling your brain properly, you're not going to be as productive, and you get a numbed or bad mood." And there's another downside, she points out: "It also makes it harder to make good food choices."

On those days when your schedule prohibits a proper meal, you can still get what you need if you pack or grab hearty snacks that combine a nourishing combo of protein, carbs, and fats. Think almond, peanut, or seed butter with an apple or pear; single-serve hummus or guac cups with vegetables; or Greek yogurt with fruit and flaxseed.

Get Good-Mood Nutrients

Despite all the online galleries listing dozens of foods that reportedly boost your mood, there isn't terrific evidence that certain foods instantly provide a magic bullet for your state of mind. Still, there's compelling research linking certain nutrients to emotional well-being.

Research suggests that omega-3 fatty acids, especially EPA, are an effective treatment for depression, both alone or as an add-on treatment, according to a 2019 study review. Foods rich in omega-3s include fish, shellfish, walnuts, flaxseed, and chia seeds. "The type of fat consumed makes a big difference," says McMordie. Research shows that trans fats and too many omega-6 fatty acids—found in some healthy foods like soybeans, seeds, and some nuts, as well as processed foods—negatively affect depression risk, while olive oil, monounsaturated fats, and omega-3 fatty acids are associated with lower depression risk. "Healthy fats are very satiating, which is important for helping your mood as well," adds Taub-Dix.

Vitamin D has also been shown to be an effective treatment for anxiety and depression, especially among people who are deficient in the nutrient. Your body makes D when exposed to sunlight. Some foods, such as milk and eggs, are fortified with D, but it's hard to get enough from food, so you may want to consider a supplement. "Many Americans are deficient, so a vitamin D supplement could be helpful in addressing mood disorders," says McMordie.

Carbs get a bad rap, but they have mood-enhancing superpowers. "Carbohydrates are the nutrient we love to hate," Taub-Dix says, "and yet carbs have been shown to stimulate feel-good chemicals like serotonin and norepinephrine made in the body. They actually do make us feel good. So when you go on a diet that eliminates carbohydrates, that could also impact your mood, because carbohydrates are comfort foods." Prioritize complex carbs: overnight oats, farro, popcorn, fruits and vegetables, and more.

"Magnesium is a particularly interesting place to start, because most people do not get nearly enough magnesium during the day, and it plays an important role in energy production," says Kristin Carlino, RD, a registered dietitian at Jersey City Medical Center. "Try to sneak in more leafy greens, nuts, seeds, and even some dark chocolate for more magnesium," she recommends.

Vitamin D has been shown to be an effective treatment for anxiety and depression, especially among those deficient.

"B vitamins also play a crucial role in converting the foods we eat into energy," Carlino says. "Eating a balanced diet can generally ensure you're getting enough, but vegans and vegetarians will need to supplement B_{12} as we only get it from animal products." Some medications, like proton pump inhibitors, can also prevent the absorption of nutrients. Talk to your health care provider about your medications to see if you need a B_{12} supplement.

Think Balance

Our bodies need a mix for a reason. Overdoing it in any one category can throw off your equilibrium, which is yet another reason to avoid trendy diets. "Balancing your diet can lead to a balanced mood," says Taub-Dix.

So how do you know you're getting the right mix? "Planning balanced meals with a complex [i.e., high-fiber] carbohydrate, a lean protein, plenty of colorful fruits and vegetables, and healthy fat will cover all of the big nutrients you need to keep your mood from fluctuating," says Carlino.

Many of us find ourselves reaching for

something sugary, like a giant scone or glass of lemonade, for a burst of energy in the moment, but doing so can leave you sluggish and out of sorts. That's because eating sugar spikes your blood sugar. "It causes a roller-coaster effect, as opposed to a smooth curve, which is what eating is supposed to do," explains Taub-Dix.

But it isn't about eliminating all sweet and carb-heavy snacks; it's about pairing them with other foods to keep you even-keeled. Try combining your carbs with protein and healthy fat, advises Taub-Dix: "It will help to smooth out your blood sugar levels and keep you feeling more level." That could mean eating a little Greek yogurt with your fruit or having a few nuts with your dessert.

Many of us reach for a cocktail or two to try to flip a bad mood, but it can backfire. First of all, alcohol is a depressant, and it may make you sleepy at first but restless when the effects wear off. So it can interrupt your sleep, which may leave you feeling cranky the next day, Taub-Dix points out. If you're going to enjoy a drink, have it with food at least a few hours before bed.

Dig Deeper

Consider how you feel in the short and long term and whether your eating is driven by cravings or by actual hunger, advises psychologist Christine Celio, PhD, of Calibrate, a medical weight loss start-up. "We all need to eat, but when we feel driven to specific foods, often it is connected to values we have assigned to the foods," she says.

As Celio explains it, there is a concept called habit looping, in which we automatically reach for the thing that makes us feel the way we long to feel. For example, if, when you were a kid, your mom gave you ice cream when you were sad, you might gravitate toward ice cream when you need a lift. "I see this a lot with things like alcohol and sugar in adults," Celio says. "Many adults will admit that too much sugar makes them almost feel hungover. They can really feel the blood sugar spike, and yet they still crave something sweet when they aren't feeling great."

She recommends trying a "future self" exercise when you're craving a certain food. "Ask yourself: What are you hoping for when you eat something you see as indulgent or not part of your normal diet? Relief? To feel better emotionally? To feel a little different? Imagine what it will be like right after you eat it, and then 10 minutes later. For some people, eating that thing is worth it; for others, they recognize that what they want—joy, relief, distraction—is momentary and something you can't really get through food."

Such a thought process can help you avoid eating empty calories and start to turn to activities that will give you a longer-lasting mood boost, whether it's connecting with a friend, going for a bike ride, or relaxing with a Headspace-type app.

Don't Beat Yourself Up

"When it comes to healthy eating, you should just try as best as you can to make it the rule rather than the exception and not stress out over those exceptions," says Taub-Dix. "You're a human being with taste buds, and you deserve to enjoy all the foods you're eating. But if you know you're eating foods that are not as good for you, then maybe work on making those the exceptions rather than the rule in your daily routine."

Ng says she finds it is helpful to focus on adding nutritious foods rather than always looking at what should be taken away. Don't give yourself hard (or impossible) rules to follow, or rules about when you're "allowed" to enjoy a homemade cookie. Instead, Ng suggests, set a goal of consuming, say, two servings of fruit and five servings of vegetables a day. "When we focus on what people can increase, it tends to naturally decrease the consumption of less desirable foods," she says.

Eating well brings its own happiness reward, as McMordie points out: "I have never had someone tell me that they feel worse when they begin consuming a healthy diet."

Water Could Make You Happier and More Productive

Here's how to easily stay hydrated.

BY JESSICA BALL, RD

IT'S NO EASY TASK TO STAY CHIPPER and motivated. Daily life means dealing with lots of activity and stress and change, and that can make it difficult to keep up with a healthy lifestyle.

But one simple thing you can do every day could boost both happiness and productivity: Drink water. A recent survey finds that staying hydrated throughout the day could be linked to more than just clearer skin and better breath.

The survey, conducted on behalf of Bosch home appliances, took a look at hydration's impact beyond physical health. Researchers used OnePoll to survey more than 2,000 Americans about their hydration habits, happiness, and perceptions of their own success. What they found was a clear link between better hydration and a more positive outlook on life.

In the study, people who drank six or more cups of water daily saw the most benefits. The study found that 56 percent of respondents said they won't drink water unless it's cold (room-temperature water is generally less appealing). Additionally, 53 percent said that if there were no ice available, they'd simply drink less water. So if you want to incentivize drinking your fill, it's smart to put it on ice.

Need an easy way to remind yourself to hydrate? Try bringing a reusable water bottle with you wherever you go, even room to room if you aren't leaving the house. Having hydration at hand allows you to sip all day long, which can help up your intake without you even realizing it.

Get your fizzy fix without the added sugar by choosing seltzer instead of a soda or energy drink. Drinks with a lot of added sugar can actually dehydrate you, and they're a major source of empty calories. Seltzers come in a variety of flavors and can help you stay hydrated when you want to switch it up from plain water. Also, try herbal tea instead of coffee for your afternoon pick-me-up as the weather cools down.

Several foods can help hydrate you, and it is probably no surprise that most are fruits and vegetables. One cup of watermelon and one medium apple each provide nearly 5 ounces of water. A half cup of chopped tomatoes and one medium potato deliver 3 and more than 4 ounces, respectively. Working in plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables is a great way to get an additional hydration boost.

If you're having trouble being consistent with drinking

water throughout the day, try setting reminders on your phone or computer to help you get into the habit of reaching for water at least every hour. Eventually it should become second nature, and you won't need reminders at all. If you notice that you haven't gotten up to use the bathroom in several hours, that's another good indication that you may not be drinking enough.

Staying hydrated can keep your memory sharp, your mood more stable, and your motivation intact. When you're well hydrated, you can even think through problems more easily. Researchers hypothesize that too little water could reduce oxygen flow to the brain or temporarily shrink neurons—or, being thirsty could simply distract you.

We all could use a boost of happiness, optimism, and productivity in our days. Though more research is needed to establish a relationship between happiness and hydration, there are plenty of good reasons to drink up every day.

THE HAPPY GUT

Research increasingly suggests a connection between the mind and the trillions of bacteria found in the gut. Could fostering a healthy microbiome be the ultimate mood booster?

BY EMILY JOSHU

You're preparing to give an important presentation and feel a fluttering in your stomach. During busy periods at work, you find yourself battling tummy troubles. If you've ever experienced these kinds of discomforts before a big event or during a mental low, it's no coincidence. It's the result of the brain and gastrointestinal (GI) tract working together, connected by a pathway called the gut-brain axis. A good diet and stress management might the key to keeping both systems happy.

There are 12 cranial nerves in the body, and they help link the brain to other areas, such as the head, neck, and torso. The gut and the brain stay connected through the 10th cranial nerve, the vagus nerve. Also called the pneumogastric nerve, the vagus nerve is responsible for several unconscious internal-organ functions, such as digestion, heart rate, breathing, cardiovascular activity, and reflex actions—coughing, sneezing, swallowing, and vomiting. "I like to call it the two-way superhighway, allowing for bidirectional messaging of chemical messengers between these two organ systems. And this really starts to explain how the two systems are connected," says Uma Naidoo, MD, a nutritional psychiatrist and the author of *This Is Your Brain on Food*.

The pathway connects the central and the enteric nervous system, which ultimately forges a relationship between the brain and the GI tract. The central nervous system, consisting of the brain and the spinal cord, acts as a processing center, coordinating activities across the entire body. The enteric nervous system, which controls gastrointestinal behavior, consists of two thin layers containing between 200 million and 600 million neurons that line the GI tract from the esophagus to the rectum. The three types of neurons included here are efferent (motor), afferent (sensory), and interneurons.

Within this gastrointestinal system is the gut microbiome, which is made up of trillions of bacteria, viruses, fungi, and other microscopic organisms that live in the intestines. These tiny organisms are called microorganisms, or microbes for short. There are more of these bacteria in the gut than there are cells in the body. "It's a really vibrant, active, biologically important system that influences our health very much," says Ginger Hultin, RDN, founder of Champagne Nutrition, a nutrition consulting firm in Seattle.

When the gut microbiome is disrupted, the gastrointestinal system can fall into distress, which results in issues with motility, or the muscular activity within the GI tract. One of the most common functional gastrointestinal disorders that is directly impacted by the gut-brain axis is irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, in which the muscles in the colon that transport digested food are sensitive to certain stimuli, such as food. Symptoms include cramps, abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, and diarrhea. It's estimated that 1 in 7 individuals across the globe have IBS. An early study in the journal *Biological Psychiatry* found that people with IBS or Crohn's disease, an inflammatory bowel disease that can affect any part of the GI tract, from the mouth to the anus, had reduced vagal tone, which indicated a reduced function of the vagus nerve. "It is really important for people to see that their colon is central to their health," says Drew Ramsey, MD, assistant clinical professor at Columbia University and author of *Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety.*

Additionally, the microbes in the gut microbiome produce chemicals that influence mood and brain function, such as serotonin, dopamine, and gamma aminobutyric acid, also known as GABA. In fact, 95 percent of the body's serotonin is produced in the gut. But the brain is still an influential source of these "happiness chemicals." Explains Dr. Ramsey, "While it's true that the majority of your body's store of serotonin is in the gut, they're separate pools. So the way the serotonin in the gut functions and what it does and how it signals to the brain, it's not like you make serotonin that floats up

to the brain and makes you happy."

While the production of happiness chemicals is important, "the number one way that you can improve mood and decrease anxiety via the gut-brain axis is through lowering inflammatory factors," Dr. Ramsey says. "We know when there's inflammation in the body. This triggers inflammation in the brain. And we know that a significant portion of people who are struggling with depression right now have a component of inflammation to their mental health concerns. And that's what makes this really exciting—the idea that through working closely with our patients, we can help them live lives that lower inflammation, that improve brain health, which improves their mental health. That's exciting stuff in mental health."

The rate of depression and anxiety disorders among individuals with a gastrointestinal condition such as IBS is significantly higher than in those without gastrointestinal woes. And the relationship is cyclical. "I really don't separate the physical and the mental conditions. If you have a gut disorder, most likely you're having some struggles with your mood," Dr. Ramsey says. "There's a huge overlap between depression and anxiety disorders and irritable bowel syndrome." In a 2017 meta-analysis of six studies published in the *Journal of Neurogastroenterology and Motility*, researchers found that depression levels were significantly higher in IBS patients compared with healthy individuals. The numbers were also higher than the rates of depression seen in patients with inflammatory bowel disease, an umbrella term used to describe disorders that cause chronic inflammation of the digestive tract, such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

This makes stress and mental health one of the biggest hurdles to quelling symptoms of gastrointestinal diseases. "If I have somebody with IBS and their stress is unchecked, I'm not going to get their symptoms under control, so it really means taking a holistic approach to a condition like IBS," says Hultin. She also points to exercise as a tool for managing digestive concerns. A 2018 study in the journal *Medicine in Sports and Exercise* examined 32 men and women who considered themselves generally sedentary. After participants engaged in 30 minutes of supervised exercise three times a week for six weeks, researchers found an increase in healthy inflammation-fighting microbes.

Antibiotics can also negatively influence gut health. "Antibiotics are a double-edged sword," says Hultin. "They're important for some people, but then they also can really do some damage, and research shows that they can shift your gut microbiome, especially with chronic exposure or high use. So that should be taken into account when you're talking to your doctor or a registered dietitian."

A 2021 study in the journal *Nature* examined the effect of 144 common antibiotics. The researchers found that two classes of antibiotics, tetracyclines and macrolides, create "collateral damage" by eliminating good bacteria. This could result in recurring infections from a harmful bacteria called Clostridioides difficile, more commonly known as C. diff, which can cause severe diarrhea, nausea, fever, stomach pain, and death. Additionally, a 2019 study in the journal *Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy* found that resistance to an antibiotic used to treat the infection Pseudomonas aeruginosa developed much more quickly than had been originally thought. A patient infected with the bacteria developed resistance to the antibiotic in 22 days.

The microbes in the gut microbiome produce chemicals that influence mood and brain function.

However, these medications are often necessary, and they don't have to negatively affect your gut. "If someone has a severe infection and they need an antibiotic, the doctor will prescribe it, and it will be the safest route for them to take an antibiotic," says Dr. Naidoo. "But if you're constantly also trying to eat healthy, including fermented foods, you know, eating those fiber-rich foods, eating clean proteins, really belting up your diet, leaning into spices... then it's almost like taking out an insurance policy. It's not that the antibiotic won't affect your gut, it's that you are working all the time to be fortifying your gut, to be feeding your gut microbes, to be eating a healthier diet."

SO WHAT DOES A GUT- AND BRAIN-HEALTHY DIET look like? One major component is adding more

foods containing probiotics and prebiotics. Probiotics are live bacteria found in certain foods and supplements. These strains are considered "good bacteria" in the digestive system and can help fight off their more harmful counterparts. For example, a 2016 study of mice published in the journal *NeuroImage* found that certain probiotics increased the production of GABA. The neurotransmitter can reduce anxiety and depressive behaviors.

Probiotics are most commonly found in fermented foods, such as kimchi, sauerkraut, yogurt, kefir, kombucha, fermented soy such as miso and tempeh, and various pickled foods. Many nondairy yogurts, such as coconut yogurt, also have added probiotics. "Adding in fermented foods is an easy way to get those live active cultures to your gut to the place where your gut microbes need to be nurtured and taken care of," Dr. Naidoo says. Research suggests that probiotics can alleviate the symptoms of conditions such as IBS, inflammatory bowel disease, yeast infections, lactose intolerance, and sepsis. While probiotic supplements are an easy way to get more of these helpful bacteria, they are not as beneficial as probiotics from food sources, because foods also have healthful benefits, such as fiber. Additionally, some supplements do not reach the large intestine, where they have maximum benefits, and instead get caught up in stomach acid. "These [probiotic foods] are great to be adding into your diet every single day. You don't actually have to go to a supplement," Dr. Naidoo says.

A 2020 study in the journal *Nutrients* found that people who ate more fruits and vegetables reported greater levels of optimism.

Prebiotics, on the other hand, are specialized plant fibers that act as food for the good bacteria and stimulate the bacteria's growth. These are often found in fruits and vegetables that contain complex carbohydrates such as fiber and resistant starch. Examples include bananas, onions, garlic, berries, legumes, beans, peas, oats, asparagus, seaweed, flaxseed, and leeks. Similar to probiotics, prebiotic supplements are convenient, but they lack the additional benefits that accompany food sources.

"We have to think about [gut and brain health] from the perspective of food," says Dr. Naidoo. "When we eat, our food is digested in the stomach and is broken down into different products. On a day that we're eating healthy meals, the breakdown is of good products for the brain and for the body. But when we're eating an unhealthy diet, the breakdown products of those foods are unhealthy and more toxic to the body. We start to understand that as we eat, the choices we make have an impact on what happens in the gut."

A 2020 study in the journal *Nutrients* found that people who ate more fruits and vegetables reported greater levels of optimism. Additionally, a systematic review in the *European Journal of Nutrition* evaluated 16 studies and found that people who ate a conventionally unhealthy diet heavy in foods such as fast food, sweets, and soda had an increased risk of developing depression, while those who followed a Mediterranean diet—which consists of healthy fats such as olive oil, lean meats, legumes, and dark leafy vegetables—were less likely to develop depression over time. However, researchers caution that there is not yet enough scientific evidence to suggest that eating more fruits and vegetables directly improves mood; instead, these studies examine an association between eating patterns and mental health.

Foods with fiber, which increases satiety and aids in overall digestion, are also star players in gut and brain health. When fiber is fermented in the colon, healthy bacteria produce short-chain fatty acids. These act as the main source of nutrition for the cells in the colon. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends 25 grams of fiber per day for women (21 grams if over the age of 50) and 38 grams per day for men (30 grams if over the age of 50). On average, however, American adults eat only about 15 grams of fiber per day.

Versatile fiber-rich choices for any time of the day include apples, dark leafy greens, beans, seeds, legumes, whole grains, nuts (particularly walnuts and almonds), and oatmeal. Dark leafy greens such as spinach and kale are also rich in folate, which has been shown to decrease the risk of depression. Additionally, a 2019 study in the journal *Nutrients* found that depression scores among

participants who consumed ¼ cup of walnuts every day were 26 percent lower than those who didn't. It also found that adults who ate nuts, especially walnuts, were more likely to have higher levels of optimism, energy, hope, and concentration, and a greater interest in activities.

The omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish such as salmon also have mood-boosting and inflammation-fighting properties. The American Psychiatric Association recommends two servings of omega-3s each week. A 2015 study in the journal *Psychiatry Research* found that participants who ate the equivalent of two fatty fish meals per week experienced positive effects on symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Consider choosing foods rich in polyphenols, plant chemicals that are digested by gut bacteria, which increase healthy gut bacteria and have been shown to potentially improve cognition. These include cocoa, green tea, olive oil, and coffee. Foods containing tryptophan are also ideal for improving gut and brain health, as they contain serotonin. These foods include turkey, eggs, and cheese, all versatile ingredients.

Hultin recommends implementing a plant-focused diet to load up on these healthful choices. A diet such as this "helps create a positive environment for the good bacteria to thrive in," she says. This doesn't mean you need to cut out meat entirely; instead, frame your plate around colorful fruits and veggies, as well as some lean meats. Hultin also points to traditional Mediterranean, Japanese, and Nordic-style diets as containing well-rounded plant foods to bolster both gut and mood.

These measures are not a guarantee of complete protection, but they do create a foundation for fostering a strong gut-brain axis. "Most people will struggle with their mental health at some point in their lives. But there are things that we can do to better insulate ourselves," Dr. Ramsey says. "The first step is really shifting toward eating for mental health and brain health."

GUT-FRIENDLY RECIPES

SOOTHE AND NOURISH

These delicious dishes are loaded with probiotic-rich foods, which can foster the gut-mood connection.

Slow-Cooker Squash, Millet & Lentil Dal with Herbed Yogurt

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 8 HRS 30 MIN

This slow-cooker dal recipe offers a range of pleasing textures: Red lentils and millet break down as they cook, and the toor dal (split pigeon peas) stays toothsome. Look for all three ingredients at Indian markets or natural foods stores. The slow cooker does most of the work for this healthy vegetarian recipe, and a quick herbed yogurt added just before serving brightens up the flavors. Bonus: Both the dal and the yogurt can be made ahead, and the leftovers are wonderful!

- **4 cups cubed peeled winter squash (1¼ pounds; 1-inch cubes)**
- **1 cup red lentils, rinsed**
- **½ cup toor dal (split pigeon peas), rinsed**
- **⅓ cup millet**
- **1 tablespoon Kashmiri chile powder (see Tips)**
- **2 teaspoons ground coriander**
- **1½ teaspoons salt**
- **1 teaspoon ground cumin**
- **½ teaspoon ground turmeric**
- **½ teaspoon ground pepper**
- **5 cups water**
- **2 tablespoons ghee or canola oil**
- **15 fresh curry leaves (optional; see Tips)**
- **1 teaspoon cumin seeds**
- **1 teaspoon black or brown mustard seeds**
- **Pinch of asafetida (see Tips)**
- **2 cups fresh or frozen corn kernels**
- **Fresh cilantro for garnish**

Herbed Yogurt

- **2 cups whole-milk plain yogurt**
- **¾ cup chopped fresh cilantro**
- **¼ cup chopped fresh mint**
- **Pinch of salt**

1. Combine squash, lentils, toor dal, millet, chile powder, coriander, 1½ teaspoons salt, cumin, turmeric, and pepper in a 4- to 7-quart slow cooker. Add water and cover. Cook on Low for 8 hours or high for 4 hours.
2. Meanwhile, prepare herbed yogurt: Whisk yogurt, ¾ cup cilantro, mint, and pinch of salt in a medium bowl. Refrigerate until ready to serve.
3. Just before serving, heat ghee (or oil) in a small skillet over medium heat. Add curry leaves (if using), cumin seeds, mustard seeds, and asafetida; cook, stirring, until the seeds start to pop and darken in color, about 30 seconds. Immediately scrape into the slow cooker and cover.
4. Add corn to the pan and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until just tender, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the corn to the slow cooker and gently stir to combine. Serve topped with the yogurt and garnished with cilantro, if desired.

Tips:

- Made from Kashmiri chiles, Kashmiri chile powder has mild heat and a vibrant red hue. Look for it at Indian markets or online. Or, you can substitute regular chili powder.
- Used in Indian and Middle Eastern cooking, asafetida (as-uh-fet-i-duh) is known for its distinct, slightly sulfurous aroma that works synergistically with other spices to enhance them, similar to the way anchovies can amp up a dish's flavor without anyone knowing they're there. You can find the spice at Indian markets or online.
- Curry leaves are native to South Asia. They have a faint citrusy flavor.

SERVES 8: 1 CUP DAL & ¼ CUP HERBED YOGURT **CAL** 306 **FAT** 7.7G (SAT 3.9G) **CHOL** 15.5MG **CARBS** 48.5G **TOTAL SUGARS** 6.9G **PROTEIN** 14G **FIBER** 8G **SODIUM** 501.9MG **POTASSIUM** 826.3MG **MAGNESIUM** 97.8MG **CALCIUM** 163.9MG **IRON** 4.2MG **FOLATE** 157.3MCG **VITAMIN A** 8008.9IU **VITAMIN C** 18.8MG

Slow-Cooker Sichuan Chicken with Scallions & Baby Bok Choy

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 8 HRS 20 MIN

Sichuan peppercorns give this brothy slow-cooker chicken dish a distinctive lemony, mouth-numbing flavor. Unrelated to peppercorns, they're the dried berries of the prickly ash tree. Look for them in specialty markets and online. If you've never had them before, try one first and add more or less to taste. Serve with sesame baby bok choy (which takes just a few minutes to prep) and Chinese noodles for an easy, healthy dinner that'll get you out of your same-old-chicken-dish rut.

- **2 pounds bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs, trimmed**
- **⅓ cup low-sodium soy sauce or tamari**
- **⅓ cup Shaoxing rice wine or dry sherry**
- **3 dried red chiles, stemmed**
- **2 teaspoons cumin seeds**
- **1½ teaspoons grated garlic**
- **1½ teaspoons grated fresh ginger**
- **1 teaspoon sugar**
- **2 whole star anise (see Tip)**
- **2 cinnamon sticks**
- **1½ teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns, divided**
- **1⅓ cups water**
- **4 scallions, cut into 1-inch pieces**
- **Crushed red pepper to taste**

Sesame Baby Bok Choy

- **6 heads baby bok choy (about 1 pound)**
- **1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil**
- **2 teaspoons toasted sesame seeds**
- **¼ teaspoon salt**

1. Combine chicken, soy sauce (or tamari), Shaoxing (or sherry), chiles, cumin seeds, garlic, ginger, and sugar in a 4- to 7-quart slow cooker. Tie star anise, cinnamon sticks and 1 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns in cheesecloth or a muslin spice bag and add to the slow cooker. Add water and cover. Cook on low for 8 hours or on high for 4 hours.
2. To prepare bok choy: About 15 minutes before serving, trim bok choy and separate leaves. Bring 1 inch of water to a boil in a large saucepan fitted with a steamer basket. Add the bok choy; steam until just tender, 8 to 10 minutes. Top with sesame oil, sesame seeds, and salt.
3. To finish the chicken: Remove and discard the spice bag. Use a slotted spoon to remove the chicken. Discard the skin and bones. Pour the broth into a fat separator or skim the fat, if desired. Stir in the remaining ½ teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns and let stand for 5 minutes.
4. Divide the chicken and broth among 6 serving bowls and top with scallions and crushed red pepper. Serve with the bok choy.

Tip: Named for its star-shaped pods that come from a small evergreen tree native to China, star anise lends a licoricelike flavor to many Asian dishes. Look for it with bulk spices in natural-foods stores or at Asian markets.

SERVES 6: ½ CUP CHICKEN WITH ⅓ CUP BROTH & ½ CUP BOK CHOY **CAL** 235 **FAT** 11.7G (SAT 2.8G) **CHOL** 76.5MG **CARBS** 5.4G **TOTAL SUGARS** 2.3G **PROTEIN** 24.6G **FIBER** 1.6G **SODIUM** 743MG **POTASSIUM** 520.8MG **MAGNESIUM** 57MG **CALCIUM** 144.8MG **IRON** 3MG **FOLATE** 85.8MCG **NIACIN EQUIVALENTS** 0.2MG **VITAMIN A** 4686.3IU **VITAMIN C** 46.9MG

Lemony Labneh with Pistachios

ACTIVE TIME: 15 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 12 HRS

Lemon olive oil and lemon zest give this labneh dip a fresh, bright flavor. Labneh, the thick, slightly salty Middle Eastern strained yogurt, is easy to make at home with this recipe. Serve with cucumber slices or pita chips as a dip or use it as a sauce to top roasted vegetables or chicken.

- **1 quart (4 cups) low-fat plain yogurt**
- **¼ teaspoon salt**
- **¼ cup shelled pistachios**
- **1 tablespoon agrumato lemon oil (see Tips) or olive oil**
- **1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley**
- **1 teaspoon lemon zest**
- **¼ teaspoon ground sumac (see Tips)**

1. Line a 7-inch or larger fine-mesh sieve with four layers of cheesecloth. Set over a bowl deep enough to leave at least 3 inches between the bottom of the sieve and the bowl. Whisk yogurt with salt in a medium bowl; spoon into the cheesecloth.

2. Refrigerate until the yogurt is thick and at least 1 cup of liquid has drained into the bowl, 12 to 24 hours. (Discard the liquid.)

3. To serve, top with pistachios, oil, parsley, lemon zest and sumac.

Tips:

• Agrumato lemon oil is created when olives are pressed together with lemons. Find it at gourmet markets or well-stocked natural-foods stores, or substitute 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil and 1 teaspoon lemon zest.

• The tart red berries of the Mediterranean sumac bush add fruity sourness to many regional dishes. Find ground sumac in Middle Eastern markets, and online.

SERVES 8: ¼ CUP **CAL** 108 **FAT** 5.3G (SAT 1.7G) **CHOL** 7MG **CARBS** 8.3G **TOTAL SUGARS** 7.4G **PROTEIN** 7G **FIBER** 0.4G **SODIUM** 144.2MG **POTASSIUM** 284.4MG **MAGNESIUM** 22.2MG **CALCIUM** 197.6MG **IRON** 0.3MG **FOLATE** 2.7MCG **NIACIN EQUIVALENTS** 0.2MG **VITAMIN A** 109.9IU **VITAMIN C** 2MG

Quinoa, Chicken & Broccoli Salad with Roasted Lemon Dressing

ACTIVE TIME: 35 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 35 MIN

Roasting lemons mellows their tartness and creates a layer of caramelized flavor that pairs well with the raw broccoli and savory quinoa in this healthy chicken dinner salad. Even better, the chicken and lemons roast on one sheet pan, making cleanup an absolute breeze.

- **1 (8-ounce) boneless, skinless chicken breast, trimmed**
- **4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided**
- **⅛ teaspoon salt plus ¼ teaspoon, divided**
- **2 small lemons, thinly sliced and seeded**
- **1 cup low-sodium chicken broth**
- **½ cup quinoa**
- **8 ounces broccoli with stems (about 1 medium head)**
- **¼ cup red-wine vinegar**
- **1 tablespoon Dijon mustard**
- **2 cups arugula**
- **¾ cup chopped walnuts, toasted**
- **½ cup dried cranberries**
- **½ cup chopped fresh mint**

1. Preheat oven to 425° F.
2. Place chicken on one side of a rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon oil and sprinkle with ⅛ teaspoon salt. Roast for 10 minutes. Place lemon slices on the other side of the baking sheet. Roast, turning once, until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the chicken reaches 160° F and the lemons are browned, 7 to 9 minutes more.
3. Meanwhile, bring broth and quinoa to a boil in a small saucepan. Reduce heat to simmer, cover, and cook until the liquid is absorbed, about 15 minutes. Remove from heat and let stand, covered, for 10 minutes.
4. Cut broccoli florets from the stems. Trim, peel, and thinly slice the stems and chop the florets into bite-size pieces.
5. Chop half of the lemon slices. Combine in a large bowl with vinegar, mustard and the remaining 3 tablespoons oil and ¼ teaspoon salt.
6. Shred the chicken. Add the chicken, the remaining lemon slices, broccoli, quinoa, arugula, walnuts, cranberries, and mint to the dressing; toss to combine.

SERVES 4: 2 CUPS **CAL** 481 **FAT** 26.5G (SAT 3.2G) **CHOL** 31.3MG **CARBS** 43G **TOTAL SUGARS** 30.8G **PROTEIN** 21.5G **FIBER** 7.9G **SODIUM** 365.5MG **POTASSIUM** 584.5MG **MAGNESIUM** 83.1MG **CALCIUM** 140MG **IRON** 3.2MG **FOLATE** 66.4MCG **VITAMIN A** 1070IU; **VITAMIN C** 62.7MG

Turkey Burgers with Gochujang & Kimchi

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 30 MIN

Korean chile paste (also known as gochujang) blended into the ground turkey makes this turkey burger recipe incredibly moist and flavorful. Top these healthy turkey burgers with kimchi—a fermented mixture of cabbage and other vegetables.

- 1 pound 93%-lean ground turkey
- 3 scallions, sliced
- 8 teaspoons Korean chile paste (see Tips), divided
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 2 tablespoons low-fat mayonnaise
- 4 small whole-wheat hamburger buns, toasted
- 12 slices English cucumber
- 1 cup kimchi

1. Preheat grill to medium-high.
2. Combine turkey, scallions, 5 teaspoons chile paste, and sesame oil in a medium bowl; gently knead together. Do not overmix. Form into 4 burgers, about 4 inches wide.
3. Oil the grill rack (see Tips). Grill the burgers until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the center registers 165° F, 3 to 4 minutes per side. Let rest for 5 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, combine mayonnaise and the remaining 3 teaspoons chile paste in a small bowl. Assemble the burgers on toasted buns with 2 teaspoons of the mayonnaise mixture, 3 slices cucumber, and ¼ cup kimchi each.

Tips:
• Use your hands to mix ground turkey until just combined (wear gloves if you prefer). Knead gently. Overmixing can make the meat tough.
• Korean chile paste (also called hot pepper paste, gochujang, or kochujang) is a fermented spicy condiment made from red chiles, soybeans, and salt. It keeps indefinitely in the refrigerator. Find it in Korean or Asian markets. To make a substitute, combine 2 tablespoons each white miso and Asian-style chile sauce, such as sriracha, and 2 teaspoons molasses.
• Oiling a grill rack before you grill food helps ensure that it won't stick. Oil a folded paper towel, hold it with tongs, and rub it over the rack. (Do not use cooking spray on a hot grill.)

SERVES 4: 1 BURGER **CAL** 341 **FAT** 11.9G (SAT 2.7G) **CHOL** 66.9MG **CARBS** 33.2G **TOTAL SUGARS** 15.2G **PROTEIN** 27.6G **FIBER** 5.1G **SODIUM** 782.4MG **POTASSIUM** 441.3MG **MAGNESIUM** 41.5MG **CALCIUM** 57.6MG **IRON** 3.1MG **FOLATE** 23.5MCG **THIAMIN** 0.1MG **VITAMIN A** 143.2IU **VITAMIN C** 2.8MG

+

SOME MUSHROOMS ARE SOLD AS EXTRACTS USED TO MAKE ADAPTOGEN TEA AND "COFFEE."

Can Adaptogens Make You Happier?

These potentially stress-relieving ingredients are used in calming beverages and as supplements. But can you really sip your way to serenity?

BY KAREN ASP

ADAPTOGENS BOOST THE body's natural ability to handle stress by adapting to meet its needs. This group of more than 70 plants brings balance the way a thermostat controls temperature: They turn up your energy when you're fatigued and help you relax when you're restless. They're also purported by health experts to address issues as disparate as trouble focusing, headaches, dry eye, high blood pressure, and even cancer. While the term *adaptogen* wasn't coined until 1940, they have been used for centuries in Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine. The most widely marketed include ashwagandha, rhodiola, holy basil, ginseng, maca, and reishi and cordyceps mushrooms. They're sold as supplements, teas, tinctures and "superfood" powders.

With the anxiety-causing events of the past few years, adaptogens have gained new popularity as a healthier coping alternative than alcohol, caffeine, or food. Scientists aren't sure exactly how they work. But the compounds they contain, such as antioxidants, are thought to increase or decrease different cellular responses—often simultaneously—to bring the body into balance. In line with this thinking, adaptogens could, say, impact how much of the fight-or-flight hormone cortisol is released, helping to reduce stress. In someone else, they could urge cells to produce more neuropeptide Y, which plays a role in regulating mood and appetite and helping the body adapt to physical stressors like exercise.

Does the research support these touted benefits? Only a handful of adaptogens have been studied, mostly in animals. Some of those preliminary trials have shown promise, but the evidence in humans has been mixed, and those studies have generally been small, short term, or of poor quality. You should consult with a medical professional before using an adaptogen. Not only could these substances interact with your current prescriptions, but they also might not be appropriate given your current health status or wellness routine.

Some medical professionals argue that adaptogens are intended to be taken long term, and that their adaptable, multi-target nature may play into the lackluster study results. Others remain wary. There's still no good research to suggest that adaptogens are a cure-all, and they're certainly not a substitute for tried-and-true stress management techniques and medical care. But increasing evidence shows that they may help ease stress as part of an overall healthy lifestyle.

CHAPTER 2

GO GUILT FREE

Food doesn't have to be the most nutritious to be exactly what you need. Eating food you enjoy and indulging some cravings has some clear advantages.

Oil

HOW I DITCHED DIETING FOR GOOD

There's a reason intuitive eating has been trending in recent years. It may be an effective way to lose weight, boost body image, and learn to stop judging foods as good or bad. Food is food. It's okay to love it all.

BY LYNNE CURRY

It's fair to say it was Whole30 that broke me. But it could have been intermittent fasting, South Beach, the Zone, clean eating, or any of the many other diets I've tried—from Weight Watchers during high school to five-day detoxes in my 40s. Year in and year out, I followed all their rules without questioning why I was always on a new wellness plan to shed the same damn 15 pounds.

In the spring of 2018, on my third round of Whole30, I hit a wall on day six. Suddenly, banning chickpeas and brown rice seemed ludicrous to me. I adore both of them—along with bread and pasta, preferably with wine (also verboten). And I worried what messages my two adolescent daughters were absorbing as I spooned Bolognese sauce over a baked sweet potato while they ate it on spaghetti. None of it made sense anymore.

Cara Harbstreet, RD, hears this a lot. As the founder of Street Smart Nutrition in Kansas City, she works to help jaded dieters find a better approach to eating. "Diets rarely deliver the results you want them to, and there's a growing backlash," she told me. So many people, like me, have recognized that dieting only succeeds in making us feel like a failure. They're rejecting those rigid plans and embracing a radically different type of un-diet: intuitive eating, sometimes referred to as mindful eating. Surveys show that interest in intuitive eating has more than doubled in the past five years and continues to rise.

Despite its trending status, intuitive eating is not some newfangled idea. Two California nutritionists, Evelyn Tribole, RDN, and Elyse Resch, RDN, developed the concept more than two decades ago, back when Atkins was all the rage. But their method has clearly struck a cultural chord. How it works: Rather than offering meal plans or lists of foods to eat and avoid, it rests on 10 principles that encourage you to ditch the diet mentality, make peace with

food, trust your hunger cues, and allow yourself to enjoy what you crave—no guilt allowed. Food is not to be feared or labeled as good or bad, and you are not good or bad because of what you choose to put in your mouth. Instead, the idea is to follow your innate ability to self-regulate your food intake—the one most of us are born with yet tend to ignore or override at some point in our lives.

Proponents of intuitive eating will tell you that weight loss is not the goal. But for many people, it is a happy side benefit. A study published in the journal *Eating and Weight Disorders,* for example, found that intuitive eaters consumed fewer calories of a pasta meal they were provided and had lower BMIs compared to dieters. Research has discovered other advantages as well, including better body image, fewer food cravings, less weight yo-yoing, and a greater ability to maintain a healthy weight over time.

Like deciding what outfit to put on, I considered: Would yogurt and fruit feel good right now, or do I need a cheese omelet?

I first read about this no-diet way of life after my Whole30 debacle. I was ready to jump off the merry-go-round of dieting, restricting, and poor self-image. One day on the beach, I watched a woman in her 40s walk by rocking an emerald-green bikini. I wondered: What would it be like to feel that comfortable in your own skin, regardless of what you actually look like? At that moment I realized that intuitive eating made more sense than any 30-day wellness plan. But I worried how it would work in real life. It felt like the nutritional equivalent of BASE jumping. Would I free-fall straight into obesity? I was scared. Food—or at least certain foods—was something I'd learned to fear. How would I know what, how, and when to eat if there were no rules, no safety net?

"It doesn't have to be super complicated. It just takes a lot of mindfulness," Lara Pence, PsyD, assured me. She's a clinical psychologist who specializes in food and body acceptance issues. In her view, permission to eat simply replaces restrictions with options. (She did note that intuitive eating doesn't work for everyone, like athletes or those with certain medical conditions.) Pence suggested I ask myself, "What am I looking for right now? What do I truly want?" An intuitive eater chooses foods that feel the most satisfying and shifts away from those that don't. Of course, this permission could also be used as an excuse to down a dozen doughnuts or eat to cover up your emotions, she said, so honest self-reflection is essential.

I've got this, I thought during those early days. I am a kale, avocado, and wild salmon lover, and I felt confident making nutritious choices for myself. Before reaching for food, I took stock of my hunger level. And, like deciding what outfit to put on, I considered: Would yogurt and fruit feel good right now, or do I need a cheese omelet?

BUT IT'S A LOT TO UNLEARN AND RELEARN AFTER years of self-denial. And I soon found myself falling back into sneaky dieting habits. Although I wasn't counting calories or macros, I became a "careful eater." Subconsciously, I was trapped in the clean-eating mindset, restricting myself to only whole, organic, and unprocessed foods. To be clear: Whole, organic, and unprocessed foods are amazing. The problem is the restricting part.

"Setting something up as 'clean' paints the alternative as dirty or bad or wrong," explained Christy Harrison, MPH, RD, author of *Anti-Diet.* And that's just another form of the food police. To embrace this way of life, I had to soften my black-and-white thinking. There's room for salmon, kale, and corn chips in a healthy diet. Have faith, Harrison said, because our worst fear about intuitive eating—that we'll lose control, especially around "forbidden" foods—is unfounded. It's actually dieting that causes people to have trouble with overindulging. A study published in the journal *Eating Behaviors* found that restrictive eating led to food obsessions, overeating, and bingeing on "bad" foods. Intuitive eating had the opposite effect.

While I'll never look at Fritos the same way as I do a piece of fruit, I did stop demonizing foods. And I found that when I allowed myself to have peanut M&M's, I would just eat a few, not the whole bag, and then move on to other things. I felt a giant sense of success and relief at no longer being a captive of my own cravings. It was more addictive—in the best way—than chocolate.

OIL

Recipes for Bite-Size Happiness

Cookies may be the ideal homemade dessert: They stay fresh for days and are fun to make.

Chocolate Peppermint Crinkle Cookies

ACTIVE TIME: 40 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 2 HRS 30 MIN

A generous amount of melted chocolate gives these nut-free, soy-free, vegetarian cookies a fudgy, brownie-like texture, but it also means a very soft dough. Chilling it helps firm the dough to a scoopable consistency.

- 3¾ cups bittersweet chocolate chips (22 ounces), divided
- 7 tablespoons unsalted butter, sliced
- ½ cup canola oil
- 2 teaspoons peppermint extract
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup whole-wheat flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- ½ cup crushed peppermint candy
- Equipment: parchment paper

1. Combine 2¾ cups chocolate chips, butter, and oil in a large microwave-safe bowl. Microwave on high, stirring every 30 seconds, until melted, about 2 minutes. Stir in peppermint extract. Let cool for 10 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, whisk all-purpose flour, whole-wheat flour, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl.
3. Combine granulated sugar and eggs in a large bowl or bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment. Beat on high speed until light in color and volume has doubled, about 3 minutes. Using a flexible spatula, fold in the cooled chocolate mixture, then the flour mixture. Fold in the remaining 1 cup chocolate chips, being careful not to overmix. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour and up to 4 days.
4. Position racks in upper and lower thirds of oven; preheat to 350°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
5. Place confectioners' sugar in a small bowl. Working in batches, scoop balls of dough, about 1½ tablespoons each, and roll in the sugar. Arrange 12 cookies on each of the prepared pans. Dust your palm with confectioners' sugar and flatten the cookies to a ½-inch thickness. Sprinkle with candy. Refrigerate the remaining dough while the first batch bakes.
6. Bake the cookies, switching the positions of the pans halfway through, until firm on the outside, 15 to 20 minutes. Let cool on the pans for 10 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely. Repeat with the remaining dough.

To make ahead: Refrigerate dough (Steps 1-3) for up to 4 days. Or freeze unbaked cookies in a single layer until solid, then transfer to a sealable plastic bag and freeze for up to 1 month. Store baked cookies airtight for up to 2 days.

MAKES 48 COOKIES: SERVING SIZE 1 COOKIE **CAL** 169 **FAT** 10G (SAT 5G) **CHOL** 20MG **CARBS** 18G **TOTAL SUGARS** 12G **PROTEIN** 2G **FIBER** 2G **SODIUM** 54MG **POTASSIUM** 18MG **VITAMIN A** 75IU

Crispy Small-Batch Chocolate Chip Cookies

ACTIVE TIME: 10 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 25 MIN

When chef and James Beard Award–winning cookbook author Virginia Willis shared her weight-loss strategies for an EatingWell *feature, she said, "I do not want the enticement of dozens of cookies lying about on the counter or in the freezer. But sometimes I just need a bite of something sweet and chocolaty. This is my 'tablespoon cookie' recipe—I don't even bother getting out the measuring cups. And I love how lacy and thin they are."*

- **2 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature**
- **2 tablespoons granulated sugar**
- **2 tablespoons turbinado sugar**
- **1 tablespoon unsweetened applesauce**
- **¼ teaspoon vanilla extract**
- **4 tablespoons white whole-wheat flour**
- **¼ teaspoon baking soda**
- **⅛ teaspoon kosher salt**
- **3 tablespoons dark chocolate chips**
- **Equipment: silicone baking mat or parchment paper**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with a nonstick silicone baking mat or parchment paper.
2. Combine butter, granulated sugar, and turbinado sugar in a small bowl. Using a rubber spatula, stir until well blended. Add applesauce and vanilla; stir to combine. Add flour, baking soda, and salt; stir to combine. Add chocolate chips and stir to combine. Using a tablespoon measure, scoop the dough onto the prepared baking sheet, spacing cookies about 2 inches apart.
3. Bake until the cookies are golden around the edges, about 8 minutes.
4. Let cool on the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a rack to cool and firm up, about 10 minutes.

To make ahead: Store airtight at room temperature for up to 2 days.

MAKES 8 COOKIES: SERVING SIZE 1 COOKIE **CAL** 97 **FAT** 5G (SAT 3G) **CHOL** 8MG **CARBS** 13G **TOTAL SUGARS** 18G **PROTEIN** 1G **FIBER** 1G **SODIUM** 70MG **POTASSIUM** 17MG

HERE'S WHY I'LL NEVER GIVE UP PASTA OR DAIRY

A registered dietitian explains that as long as you don't have an intolerance or an allergy, pasta, cheese, milk, yogurt, and butter all have a place in a healthy kitchen.

BY LISA VALENTE, RD

When we went to Italy a few years ago, I almost cried over my cacio e pepe. My husband says he saw a tear, but I don't know. Either way, that bowl of noodles, cheese, and black pepper was so delicious that it made me wonder why so many people shun pasta. I know low-carb diets are popular, but pasta itself is often treated as its own special category of food to avoid. Still, as a registered dietitian (and Italian American), I always include pasta in my diet. Here's why I think it deserves a spot on your plate too, as well as a bit about pasta nutrition—and why you shouldn't consider dairy products off limits, either.

So here's why I love pasta: It's delicious, it's fast, it's cheap, and it's versatile. Plus, the whole family loves it. Those are the big reasons, and they're all pretty good ones. Pasta night is one of the easiest nights of the week for my family, as far as dinners go. I can make peanut noodles, mac and cheese, or a pot of pesto pasta with vegetables, and everyone (toddler included) is satisfied. Plus, I usually get at least one meal of leftovers. Pasta costs around $1 or $2 per box (that's less than 20 cents a serving), so it's an affordable way to feed hungry mouths. Plus, there are so many pasta recipes that take 30 minutes or less. And they always turn out tasty.

Now, if you agree with me on all of that but you still think pasta is "bad" for you, here's what you should know. Two ounces of dried white pasta has about 200 calories, 7 grams of protein (that's more than an egg), and 2 grams of fiber, along with iron and B vitamins. Choose whole-wheat pasta and you'll get a little bit more protein and 7 grams of fiber. Bean-based pastas are another way to up your protein and fiber intake (but they do taste a little different compared with traditional pasta).

Pasta may be a carbohydrate-rich food, but it also delivers a lot of important nutrients. It's certainly not empty calories.

I know what you're thinking. Who eats just one serving of pasta? Most of us do eat more, but not the equivalent of a never-ending bowl. About a cup of cooked pasta (for most shapes that's 2 ounces of dry pasta) mixed with vegetables can be a satisfying portion for many people. But if you eat 2 whole cups of pasta, that's only about 400 calories (plus 14 grams of protein and vitamins and minerals). That's not too shabby for a 2-cup serving.

Another thing to note—the Mediterranean diet consistently ranks as the top diet to follow for better health. Guess what? Pasta is a part of that diet. It's not that you should eat it for every meal, but it can absolutely be included in a healthy diet.

If you have a special diet concern, such as diabetes, there are plenty of ways to make pasta fit into your diet. Choose whole-grain or bean varieties more often, bulk it up with veggies and protein, choose sauces without too much sodium. If you're gluten free, you can cook with gluten-free pastas, which have come a very long way in taste and texture.

Cheese and yogurt have impressive nutrition benefits, especially if you're trying to boost your protein intake.

Cream and cheese are popular ingredients in pasta dishes—which brings us to milk and dairy products. There are now seemingly endless types of nondairy milks and milk alternatives on the market, from oat milk to cashew milk. Dairy's formerly glowing reputation seems a little more foggy as these plant-based milks have taken center stage, perpetuating the thought that dairy is somehow bad for you. However, there is still a lot to be gained from consuming dairy. It's packed with nutrients, affordable, and has been used in many different ways by many different cultures for centuries. My professional opinion is that if you enjoy dairy and are not lactose intolerant or allergic, there is no reason to ditch it.

As a registered dietitian, I would be remiss not to mention how dairy stands in a league of its own when it comes to nutrition. For many athletes, milk is the preferred recovery drink after a workout due to its combination of protein and carbs. It is also an excellent source of vitamin B_{12} and calcium, which are important for bone health, brain health, and healthy metabolism. Milk is also fortified with vitamin D, which also keeps bones strong and supports healthy immunity, as well as with vitamin A, which helps support healthy vision. Manufacturers add these nutrients to milk to work together with the calcium and nutrients naturally found in milk to round out its nutritional profile. Nondairy milks are often fortified with calcium and vitamin B_{12} to try

to mimic milk's impressive nutritional profile, though it's not a standard practice.

Cheese and yogurt have impressive nutrition benefits too, especially if you're trying to boost your protein intake. One ounce of cheese contains around 7 grams of protein, and a cup of yogurt has 14 grams of protein, for some serious vegetarian-friendly staying power. Greek yogurt has even more protein, with a whopping 23 grams per cup.

Beyond being healthy, dairy is incredibly versatile. Yogurt is perfect for smoothies or parfaits, and you can add cheese to basically everything (I'm testing the limits every day). Cream cheese can top a bagel, thicken up a soup, or add richness to a sauce. Ricotta goes just as well in baked goods as it does in pasta. Dairy can add creaminess, flavor, and nutrition to just about any dish.

Products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese are affordable and can be found at most any grocery store. They are a great vegetarian protein option, especially if you're on a budget. For example, dairy milk costs around $4 per gallon—less than what most nondairy milks cost for a half gallon. Plus, eating dairy helps me eat less meat. If my meal has satisfying protein in it from dairy, I won't hesitate about skipping meat altogether. Eating less meat can benefit your health, your wallet, and the health of the planet, too.

PASTA & CHEESE RECIPES

ENJOYABLE AND SATISFYING

Lemony Linguine with Spring Vegetables

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 30 MIN

Instead of cooking pasta in a huge pot of water, here we use just 3½ cups for this one-pot pasta recipe. When the pasta is al dente, most of the water has evaporated, and the bit that's left is thickened with the starch that cooks off the pasta. With just a few add-ins, like lemon and Parmesan, you get a delicious, silky sauce. Want to use up your veggie stash in the freezer? Swap in 8 ounces frozen spinach for fresh.

- 8 ounces whole-wheat linguine or fettuccine
- 4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- 3½ cups water
- 1 9-ounce package frozen artichoke hearts
- 6 cups chopped mature spinach
- 2 cups peas, fresh or frozen
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese, divided
- ¼ cup half-and-half
- 1 tablespoon lemon zest
- 3–4 tablespoons lemon juice

1. Combine pasta, garlic, salt, and pepper in a large pot. Add water. Bring to a boil over high heat. Boil, stirring frequently, for 8 minutes.
2. Stir in artichokes, spinach, and peas and cook until the pasta is tender and the water has almost evaporated, 2 to 4 minutes more.
3. Remove from heat and stir in ¼ cup cheese, half-and-half, lemon zest, and lemon juice to taste. Let stand, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Serve sprinkled with the remaining ¼ cup cheese.

SERVES 4: 1¾ CUPS **CAL** 372 **FAT** 7G (SAT 3G) **CHOL** 13.9MG **CARBS** 63.9G **TOTAL SUGARS** 7.4G **PROTEIN** 18.2G **FIBER** 14.9G **SODIUM** 581.1MG **POTASSIUM** 930.5MG **MAGNESIUM** 163MG **CALCIUM** 233.6MG **IRON** 4.5MG **FOLATE** 273.2MCG **VITAMIN A** 5193IU **VITAMIN C** 49.5MG

Cheese Fondue with Fennel & Tomatoes

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 30 MIN

The alpine cheeses in this healthy cheese fondue recipe are known for melting smoothly, which is key in a fondue. Adding vegetables brings texture and bonus nutrition while complementing the buttery nuttiness of the cheeses. To serve 12, plan to offer 6 cups of cut-up vegetables for dipping, such as steamed broccoli and cauliflower florets or strips of raw fennel and red bell pepper.

- 1½ tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 cups diced fennel
- 1 cup diced onion
- 1 (14-ounce) can no-salt-added diced tomatoes, drained well
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- Freshly ground pepper to taste
- 10 ounces Emmentaler or Swiss cheese, shredded (3½ cups)
- 6 ounces Comté or Gruyère cheese, shredded (2 cups)
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour, plus more as needed
- 1 teaspoon fennel seeds, gently crushed
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1¼ cups light, fruity white wine, such as a dry Riesling

1. Fill a fondue pot (or small slow cooker) with very hot water and set aside to warm.
2. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add fennel and onion and cook, stirring often, until translucent, 8 to 10 minutes. Add tomatoes, salt, and pepper; cook, stirring occasionally, until any liquid evaporates, 2 to 4 minutes. Remove from heat.
3. Combine both cheeses, flour, fennel seeds, and cayenne in a medium bowl.
4. Heat wine in a medium heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium heat until hot but not boiling. Add the cheese mixture a handful at a time, stirring until melted before adding more. Remove from heat and stir in the vegetable mixture.
5. Drain and dry the fondue pot or slow cooker. Pour in the fondue and keep warm over a low flame (or on the warm setting) to serve. Stir in a teaspoon or two of flour if the fondue starts to separate.

SERVES 12: ½ CUP FONDUE **CAL** 202 **FAT** 13G (SAT 7.1G) **CHOL** 37.3MG **CARBS** 6.3G **TOTAL SUGARS** 2G **PROTEIN** 11.1G **FIBER** 1G **SODIUM** 175.3MG **POTASSIUM** 142.8MG **MAGNESIUM** 18.9MG; **CALCIUM** 346.1MG **IRON** 0.4MG **FOLATE** 13.1MCG **VITAMIN A** 536.3IU **VITAMIN C** 5.3MG

Spinach & Artichoke Chicken

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 20 MIN

Inspired by artichoke dip, we made a creamy cheese topping to serve on quick-cooking chicken breast cutlets for an oh-so-satisfying meal.

- 1 (10-ounce) package frozen spinach, thawed
- ½ cup chopped canned artichoke hearts, rinsed
- ½ cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese
- 2 ounces reduced-fat cream cheese, softened
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 pound chicken cutlets
- ½ teaspoon ground pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1. Preheat broiler to high.
2. Squeeze as much water from spinach as possible. Place in a medium bowl and add artichoke hearts, Monterey Jack, cream cheese, and mayonnaise. Stir to combine.
3. Pat chicken dry and sprinkle with pepper and salt. Heat oil in a large cast-iron or other oven-safe skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken to the pan and cook until browned, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip and cook for 1 minute more.
4. Top the chicken with the spinach mixture. Place the pan under the broiler and broil until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the thickest part of a cutlet registers 165°F and the topping is bubbly, 2 to 3 minutes.

SERVES 4: 7 OZ. SMOTHERED CHICKEN
CAL 366 **FAT** 23G (SAT 7G) **CHOL** 108MG
CARBS 6G **TOTAL SUGARS** 1G
PROTEIN 33G **FIBER** 3G **SODIUM** 449MG
VITAMIN A 8635IU

Beef & Pork Ragù with Fresh Whole-Wheat Taglierini

ACTIVE TIME: 2 HRS
TOTAL TIME: 3 HRS 45 MIN

Skip the jar of tomato sauce at the supermarket. This homemade ragù is so simple and good that you'll want to make it in batches and freeze it so you always have some around. For the homemade pasta, this healthy recipe uses whole-wheat flour, adding a nutty flavor and fiber. Serve with your favorite Italian red wine.

Ragù

- **2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- **3 medium carrots, diced**
- **2 medium onions, diced**
- **1½ pounds ground beef**
- **1½ pounds ground pork**
- **4 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary**
- **1½ teaspoons salt**
- **1½ teaspoons ground pepper**
- **1 cup dry red wine**
- **2 (28-ounce) cans whole peeled tomatoes**
- **1 tablespoon tomato paste**

Pasta

- **2½ cups whole-wheat flour, plus more for dusting**
- **⅛ teaspoon salt**
- **4 large eggs**
- **Grated Grana Padano cheese for garnish**

1. To prepare ragù: Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add carrots and onions and cook, stirring frequently, until the onions begin to brown, 8 to 10 minutes.
2. Add beef, pork, and rosemary. Cook, breaking up the meat with a wooden spoon, until it is browned, about 10 minutes. Season with 1½ teaspoons salt and pepper. Add wine and cook until it's mostly evaporated, about 5 minutes. Add tomatoes and tomato paste. Bring to a simmer. Reduce heat to low, partially cover and cook for 3 hours. Stir occasionally to break up the tomatoes and ensure that the ragù doesn't stick to the bottom of the pot. (Makes about 10 cups.)
3. To prepare pasta: Mound flour in the center of a clean work surface and add salt. Make a well in the middle of the mound and crack eggs into it. Beat the eggs with a fork, gradually mixing them with the flour. When just over half the flour is incorporated, flour your hands and knead and fold in the rest. When all the flour is mixed in, continue kneading the dough until it's shiny and elastic, about 20 minutes. (Alternatively, combine flour and salt in a stand mixer fitted with the flat beater. Mix on medium-low speed, adding eggs one at a time and waiting until each egg is incorporated before adding the next one. Replace the flat beater with the dough hook. Mix on medium-low for 2 minutes. Transfer the dough to a clean work surface and knead into a ball. Return the dough to the mixer and knead until shiny and elastic, about 5 minutes.)
4. Form the dough into a ball, wrap in plastic, and let rest at room temperature for 30 minutes.
5. Place the dough on a lightly floured surface, flatten slightly and cut into quarters. Rewrap three of the quarters separately and, working with one quarter at a time, shape it into a rough rectangle. With the sheet roller of a pasta machine on the widest setting, feed the dough in, short-end first. Fold the dough in thirds like a letter, lightly flour it and roll two more times.
6. Decrease the roller width by one setting and roll the dough again. Continue decreasing the roller width and passing the dough through on each setting. Flour the dough if it begins to stick. If the sheet gets too long to work with, cut it in half and work with on half at a time, rolling to the third-thickest setting.
7. Cut the pasta sheet in half crosswise and guide it through the thinner pasta cutter, catching the cut noodles below. Lightly flour the noodles, spin them into a bundle, and rest them on a floured baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining dough quarters.
8. Right before serving, bring a large pot of water to a boil. Cook half the pasta for 2 minutes. Use tongs or a small strainer to transfer it to a large bowl. Repeat with the remaining pasta.
9. Add 5 cups ragù to the pasta and toss gently to coat. Serve with Grana Padano.

To make ahead: Refrigerate ragù (Steps 1 and 2) for up to 3 days or freeze for up to 3 months.

SERVES 10: 1 CUP, TOSSED PASTA WITH SAUCE **CAL** 281 **FAT** 9.3G (SAT 3.1G) **CHOL** 116.3MG **CARBS** 27.6G **TOTAL SUGARS** 3.2G **PROTEIN** 20.9G **FIBER** 4.4G **SODIUM** 466.6MG **POTASSIUM** 384.5MG **MAGNESIUM** 59.1MG **CALCIUM** 50.7MG **IRON** 3.1MG **FOLATE** 28.9MCG **VITAMIN A** 1987.1IU **VITAMIN C** 13.3MG

CHAPTER 3

COMING TOGETHER

Food can be the ultimate connector. Gathering at the table (or in the kitchen) with friends and family can be a recipe for happy times and happy memories.

THE POWER OF FRIENDS

Not only can meals with pals provide an instant mood lift: Over the long term, they can help combat cognitive decline and lead to a longer, happier life.

BY COURTNEY MIFSUD INTREGLIA

Aristotle once said, "In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge. They keep the young out of mischief; they comfort and aid the old in their weakness, and they incite those in the prime of their life to noble deeds." Friends are the family members we select to stay in our lives. When I reflect on some of the most joyous moments in my life, the ones spent laughing with good friends around a delicious meal stand out. At a new Greek restaurant, my closest friends and I shared a spread of tzatziki, baba ganoush, skordalia, and fava bean dip to mark a pregnancy announcement. A birthday celebration featured decadent egg dishes, from omelets to eggs Benedict, and plenty of mimosas.

"Eating together is an opportunity to share an experience with peers, friends, and family that allows us to connect over an activity or an experience that many people tend to enjoy, which is food," says Jessica Stern, a clinical psychologist and clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at NYU Langone Health. Even without an occasion of note, the ritual of getting together with good company over a meal sparks a special kind of connection—one that promotes memory formation and overall happiness. Plus, there's a unique relationship between a social network and overall good health.

How Friends Keep Us Healthy

Having a close circle of friends can decrease your risk of heart problems, diabetes, and stroke, and evidence shows that a lack of friends can take a toll on your longevity. A 10-year Australian study found people with a solid group of friends were 22 percent more likely to live longer than individuals with fewer friends. According to a 2015 meta-analytic review, lonely people have up to a 32 percent increased likelihood of mortality. "Substantial evidence now indicates that

individuals lacking social connections are at risk for premature mortality," write the authors from Brigham Young University. "The risk associated with social isolation and loneliness is comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality, including those identified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (physical activity, obesity, substance abuse, responsible sexual behavior, mental health, injury and violence, environmental quality, immunization, and access to health care)."

And when you're sick, friends can be crucial to recovery. In a study of nearly 3,000 nurses with breast cancer, those with close friends were nearly four times less likely to die from their illness than those without close pals. The proximity and amount of contact the participants had with their friends was not associated with survival; it was enough just to know that they were there in spirit.

Brain Health Benefits

Research has found that friendships can preserve our brain health as we age, while social isolation may be a key risk factor for cognitive decline in the elderly. A 2012 study found that older people's dementia risk increased with their feelings of loneliness. Over three years, the study followed more than 2,000 residents of the Netherlands ages 65 or older. None of the participants had dementia at the beginning of the study, but 13.4 percent of those who said they felt lonely at the start of the research developed dementia by the end of the study, compared with only 5.7 percent who did not feel lonely. "The fact that 'feeling lonely' rather than 'being alone' was associated with dementia onset suggests that it is not the objective situation but rather the perceived absence of social attachments that increases the risk of cognitive decline," the researchers wrote in their findings. However, the study found an association, and it couldn't determine for certain whether the loneliness was a cause of the dementia.

The cognitive benefits of friendships are compounded when you consider how an event like sharing a meal can contribute to the creation of memories. "The mind as it ages tends to forget small little detailed-oriented facts and tends to hold on to experiential memories related to people for much longer," says Stern. "So even if people are aging and finding that they're having reduced memory or increased forgetfulness, the types of information that they're likely to hold onto the longest are memories with other people that they know and love. And that's pretty powerful."

Plus, a strong social network wields a mighty influence on mental well-being. "Humans are social beings, which means that social connection is crucial to our functioning," says Stern. "Even for those who are introverts or shy, everybody needs social connection in one way or another. It might vary from person to person, but we all need some sort of social connection. If we are socially connected, that allows us to experience validation, improved mood, and reduced stress."

The Joys of Dining Out

"When people eat out, they might eat a little bit differently than they do on a regular basis," Stern observes. "They are more likely to indulge in foods that they don't eat regularly, either due to health reasons or just due to finances. And sometimes novelty can increase dopamine levels. Plus, also we know that certain types of food can increase dopamine levels." Dopamine, which acts as both a hormone and a chemical neurotransmitter in your body, can create feelings of pleasure and reward and help you stay happy and motivated. Researchers have found that cheese, chocolate, strawberries, and coffee can stimulate dopamine production. "So the foods themselves can increase dopamine, but then also just the nature of being out with friends and family, which is inherently an enjoyable activity, can increase dopamine itself," says Stern.

An abundance of research shows that spending money on an experience like dining out makes people happier than spending money on things. Research published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* found that those who spent money on experiences rather than on material goods were happier because the excitement we often get from purchasing things tends to diminish after we get used to them. However, the joy and memories experiences bring can give us stronger feelings of satisfaction. That can be true even if the

experience doesn't last nearly as long as the item purchased. Plus, the opportunity to be generous and treat others to a meal reflects further findings of the study. "Life experiences become part of who we are. They are woven into our memories, shape our identity, and are generally not replaceable or upgradeable," the study's authors wrote. "Our results demonstrate that individuals who are less materialistic are happier, likely in part because of how they spend their discretionary income."

How Eating Together Builds Community

Sharing a meal with other people is an opportunity to share things you enjoy with the people you love. Alice Julier, a sociologist and the director of the Center for Regional Agriculture, Food, and Transformation at Chatham University, argues in her book *Eating Together* that dining together can radically widen people's perspective. According to Julier, diners tend to view those of different races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds as more equal than they would in other social scenarios.

Furthermore, dining together is an opportunity to share the culture of food. Have you ever tried a new cuisine and been inspired to use that experience as an entry point to exploring the food culture of that region? "People will often have time-honored traditions and memories behind foods that they like to cook or that they like to eat," says Stern. "Being able to share those memories with other people can be really fun, plus you can then create new memories around those foods and drinks, which can be equally enjoyable."

THE GRANDMOTHER PROJECT

Chef Brooke Siem shares nostalgic recipes for sweets from some of the most seasoned hands around the world.

STORY AND LOCATION PHOTOGRAPHY BY BROOKE SIEM
RECIPE PHOTOGRAPHY BY PENNY DE LOS SANTOS

FROM THE TIME I COULD CHEW, I spent afternoons in a double-wide trailer with my mother's first husband's mother, a diminutive woman named Ellie who cared for me as if I were her flesh and blood. She always set out the same spread for lunch: flat-iron grilled cheese made with white bread and a single slice of American cheese, dill pickles, salty chips, and ice-cold well water.

Year after year, I sat at that checkered cloth–covered table in Reno, Nevada, and listened to Ellie's stories about arriving at Ellis Island from Italy, raising her 11 younger siblings during the Great Depression, and dealing blackjack at the once-famous Harold's Club casino for the likes of Sammy Davis Jr.

That was my introduction to the link between cooking and storytelling, and discovering the tales behind recipes has been the driving force of my career ever since. After I attended the Institute of Culinary Education and then co-founded a Manhattan bakery, a win on the hit Food Network show *Chopped* in 2016 helped me fund a yearlong trip around the world. Instead of spending my mealtimes in restaurants as I traveled, I decided to return to the home kitchen. I missed the warmth of Ellie's table and the way a simple meal

and conversation filled my soul. That's how the Grandmother Project was born.

Across nine countries on four continents, I sought out grandmothers willing to share their stories, their kitchens, and their recipes. I met these women through friends of friends, extended family, and kind strangers. Sometimes I needed translators; sometimes I didn't. We gathered around stoves and talked about love and loss, hardship and grace. Each time, I was reminded of the power of preparing food with others. It is more than a means to nourishment. It's an expression of love that transcends borders. Here are some of my favorite memories from that year abroad and the delicious desserts we prepared together.

Isabel's Quadradinhos de Laranja

When I think of Lisbon, the first thing I see in my mind is a splash of yellow. Yellow buildings around every corner, yellow wooden trams snaking their way through narrow cobblestoned streets, and in every window of every pastry shop, a display of yellow-hued sweets.

I asked Isabel about this curious confectionery color palette as she brushed flour off her grandmother's worn, leather-bound recipe book. "It is because of the Catholicism," she said in heavily accented but spunky English. "Many, many years ago, like in the 15th and 16th century, the nuns used the egg whites to starch their wimples [head coverings worn by nuns]. So they used the yolks and lots of sugar in the sweets."

Though Isabel's recipe does use egg whites, she wasn't kidding about the sugar. Her recipe for *quadradinhos de laranja,* or "little squares of orange," calls for nearly a pound. Meant to be served at teatime, the light, springy cake is certainly sweet, but it is balanced by fresh orange juice and zest that add some tang to the final product.

Quadradinhos de Laranja (Little Squares of Orange)

ACTIVE TIME: 35 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HRS

Orange lovers, rejoice! This cake is packed with sunny flavor thanks to loads of zest, plus it's drenched with orange syrup after coming out of the oven. Tightly wrap leftovers in plastic wrap to prevent the cake from drying out.

- ½ cup white whole-wheat flour
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 4 large eggs, separated and divided
- 1¼ cups granulated sugar plus ⅓ cup, divided
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
- Zest of 2 oranges plus ⅓ cup orange juice, divided
- Equipment: parchment paper

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with cooking spray. Line with parchment paper, leaving 1 inch overhanging the long sides. Coat the parchment with cooking spray.
2. Whisk whole-wheat flour, all-purpose flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium bowl.
3. Beat egg whites in the bowl of a stand mixer with the whisk attachment, or in a large bowl with an electric mixer, on low speed until the whites begin to froth, about 1 minute. Increase the speed to medium and beat until foamy and doubled in size, about 1 minute. Increase speed to medium-high and beat until stiff peaks form, 1 to 2 minutes more. Transfer the egg whites to a clean bowl and set aside.
4. Wash and dry the mixing bowl (if using a stand mixer, switch to the paddle attachment). Beat 1¼ cups sugar and butter in the bowl on medium speed until creamy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add egg yolks one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Beat in orange zest, scraping down the sides as needed. With the mixer on low speed, add the flour mixture, one-third at a time, beating until just combined.
5. Using a flexible spatula, gently fold the egg whites into the batter. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and spread into an even layer.
6. Bake until the cake is light golden and the top springs back when touched lightly, 25 to 35 minutes.
7. Meanwhile, combine orange juice and the remaining ⅓ cup sugar in a small bowl. Stir until the sugar is dissolved.
8. While the cake is hot, brush with the orange syrup. Let cool for 15 minutes. Lift the cake out of the pan with the parchment and transfer to a cutting board. Cut into 1½-inch squares.

MAKES 48 SQUARES: SERVING, 1 PIECE
CAL 59 **FAT** 2G (SAT 1G) **CHOL** 21MG
CARBS 9G **TOTAL SUGARS** 7G
PROTEIN 1G **FIBER** 0G **SODIUM** 26MG
POTASSIUM 12MG

Brooke Siem (from left) learns to make Quadradinhos de Laranja with Isabel and Alice in Lisbon.

Grazia's Castagnaccio

"Enough is the right amount," said Grazia (above left, with me) after sifting a generous portion of chestnut flour into a bowl for her *castagnaccio,* a chestnut cake originally created by peasants who relied on the bountiful chestnuts found all throughout the hills of northern Italy. Chestnuts, called *castagne* in Italian, peak in October and November. They're harvested en masse, dried, and milled into flour to be used year-round.

Castagnaccio is a staple in Grazia's house throughout the chestnut season. Her husband, Gabriel, loves the slightly sweet cake so much that she makes it almost every night in the fall.

The recipe is straightforward, with minimal ingredients, but the toasted pine nuts, plump raisins, and fresh rosemary combine with the chestnut flour to create a complex flavor and a firm, chewy texture that's unlike anything else. The chestnut flour creates a silky yet firm torte that's rich without being heavy.

Castagnaccio (Chestnut Cake)

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 1 HR 10 MIN

Sweets not your thing? This cake is almost savory, flavored with rosemary and pine nuts, and gets just a touch of sweetness from plump raisins. Chestnut flour tends to clump, so for the best texture, don't skip the sifting.

- **2 tablespoons fine dry bread crumbs**
- **½ cup raisins**
- **2½ cups warm water, divided**
- **4 cups chestnut flour**
- **1 teaspoon salt**
- **¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil plus 2 teaspoons, divided**
- **4 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted, divided**
- **2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh rosemary**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat a 9-inch round cake pan with cooking spray. Sprinkle with bread crumbs and tilt and turn to coat the pan. Shake out the excess.
2. Place raisins in a small bowl and cover with ½ cup warm water. Let plump for 10 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, sift chestnut flour and salt into a large bowl. Stir in the remaining 2 cups water and ¼ cup oil. (The batter will be thick yet pourable, like melted peanut butter.) Drain the raisins and stir them into the batter along with 2 tablespoons pine nuts. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan. Sprinkle with rosemary and the remaining 2 tablespoons pine nuts and gently press them into the batter. Drizzle with the remaining 2 teaspoons oil.
4. Bake until the cake is firm and the surface is crackly, 35 to 40 minutes. Let cool in the pan for 10 minutes, then turn out onto a wire rack until cool enough to slice. Serve warm or at room temperature.

To make ahead: Store covered at room temperature for up to 4 days.

SERVES 12: 1 SLICE **CAL** 194 **FAT** 9G (SAT 1G) **CHOL** 0MG **CARBS** 28G **TOTAL SUGARS** 12G **PROTEIN** 2G **FIBER** 2G **SODIUM** 212MG **POTASSIUM** 67MG

Liba's Koláče

No experience better represents the spirit of the Grandmother Project than my time with Liba in the small town of Týnec, Czech Republic. Fluent in French, English, and her native Czech, Liba was born at the tail end of World War II and spent most of her life living under communist rule.

Liba taught me to make poppy-seed *koláče,* a Czech pastry with a lemon-poppy seed center, on a bitterly cold January day. We shaped enriched dough and set it over the cast-iron stove to rise while she recounted stories of standing in line for bananas, of smuggling in French textbooks, and what it was like living through the rise and fall of walls. With much of the world on the precipice of political change, it was an apt time to look back at history and think about the implications of such separation. Because, as Liba said, "It is easy to build walls. But to destroy them is much more difficult."

Czech Poppy Seed Koláče

ACTIVE: 1 HR 5 MIN
TOTAL: 2¾ HRS

To create the signature, even indentation in each koláče (pronounced "ko-la-chay"), Liba uses a 100-gram weight, about 1¼ inches in diameter. Anything round and just a touch smaller than the balls of dough works, like the bottom of a glass spice jar. Dust it with flour before using to prevent sticking. We adapted the recipe with half whole-wheat flour.

Dough

- **1¼ cups low-fat milk**
- **2 ¼-ounce packages active dry yeast (1½ tablespoons)**
- **1 tablespoon granulated sugar**
- **3 large egg yolks, room temperature, plus 1 large egg mixed with 1 tablespoon water for egg wash, divided**
- **4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter, melted and cooled to room temperature**
- **¼ cup canola oil**
- **2 cups white whole-wheat flour**
- **2 cups all-purpose flour**
- **⅓ cup confectioners' sugar**
- **2 teaspoons kosher salt**
- **Zest of 1 lemon**
- **⅓ cup lard, melted and cooled to room temperature**

Filling

- **1 cup low-fat milk**
- **1 cup poppy seeds**
- **2 teaspoons all-purpose flour**
- **2 teaspoons honey**
- **Zest of 1 lemon**

Equipment: Parchment paper

1. To prepare dough: Heat 1¼ cups milk in a small saucepan over medium-high heat until steaming. Let cool until about 110°F. Stir in yeast and granulated sugar. Set aside until frothy, about 10 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, place egg yolks in a medium bowl. While whisking the yolks, gently stream in melted butter and oil.
3. Combine whole-wheat flour, 2 cups all-purpose flour, confectioners' sugar, salt, and lemon zest in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook or in a large bowl. Add the yeast and yolk mixtures, then beat until the dough pulls away from the sides and forms a ball, 3 to 5 minutes with a stand mixer, 10 to 15 minutes by hand.
4. Slowly add lard and mix until all the lard is incorporated and the dough no longer sticks to the bowl, 3 to 5 minutes. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the dough rise in a warm place until doubled in size, about 1 hour.
5. Meanwhile, prepare filling: Mix milk, poppy seeds, flour, honey, and lemon zest in a small saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until bubbly and thickened, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool completely, about 1 hour.
6. Line 3 baking sheets with parchment paper. Turn the dough out onto a floured surface. Use a knife to slice off walnut-size chunks. Flatten each with your palm, then fold the edges under to create a tight ball. Arrange the balls, seam side down, on the prepared baking sheets, about 2 inches apart. Cover with plastic wrap and let double in size, 30 to 40 minutes.
7. Preheat oven to 375°F.
8. Dust the bottom of a small spice jar (or other similar-size object) with flour and use it to press a large indentation into the middle of each koláče, leaving about a ¼-inch lip. Brush with egg wash. Fill each indentation with the filling.
9. Bake the koláče until puffy and lightly golden, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool, about 10 minutes.

To make ahead: Freeze cooled koláče airtight for up to one month.

MAKES 56 PIECES: SERVING, 1 PIECE **CAL** 84 **FAT** 5G (SAT 1G) **CHOL** 15MG **CARBS** 9G **TOTAL SUGARS** 2G **PROTEIN** 2G **FIBER** 1G **SODIUM** 75MG **POTASSIUM** 42MG

Budin de Pan (Bread Pudding)

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 1 HR 20 MIN

The caramel for this pudding is made directly in the pan you bake it in (one less dish to wash!), so you'll need a metal cake pan or pie plate. Sofy uses Wonder bread, but any soft white sandwich bread will produce luscious results.

- **¾ cup granulated sugar plus ½ cup, divided**
- **3 large eggs, lightly beaten**
- **1½ cups reduced-fat milk**
- **1 cup reduced-fat sour cream**
- **10 ounces soft white sandwich bread, cubed (6 cups)**
- **2 teaspoons vanilla extract**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Put a kettle of water on to boil for the water bath.
2. Add ¾ cup sugar to a 9-inch metal cake or pie pan (not nonstick) and place it directly on a stovetop burner at medium heat. Hold the pan with tongs and tilt and rotate as the sugar melts. Cook until the sugar is dissolved completely and the syrup just starts to turn a light golden brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Let cool while you prepare the batter.
3. Combine eggs, milk, sour cream, bread, vanilla, and the remaining ½ cup sugar in a blender. Blend until smooth. Pour the batter over the caramel and cover the pan with foil.
4. Place the pan in a larger baking pan. Pour in enough boiling water to come halfway up the sides of the cake or pie pan. Carefully transfer the baking pan to the oven. Bake until the pudding is springy to the touch, about 1 hour.
5. Remove the pudding from the water bath, uncover, and immediately run a knife around the edge. Place a serving plate upside-down on it, then invert the pudding onto the plate. Spoon any remaining caramel over the top. Let cool slightly, about 10 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

SERVES 12: 1 SLICE **CAL** 206 **FAT** 5G (SAT 2G) **CHOL** 57MG **CARBS** 35G **TOTAL SUGARS** 24G **PROTEIN** 5G **FIBER** 1G **SODIUM** 166MG **POTASSIUM** 117MG

Sofy's Budin de Pan

Argentina was the last country I traveled to during my year abroad, and finding a grandmother proved difficult. After six weeks of empty leads, I turned to Reddit as a last resort. A college student in Washington, D.C., saw my post on r/BuenosAires and messaged her Argentinian grandmother, Sofy.

We first met at a Starbucks, and any nerves we each had were squashed within moments. Sofy spoke English, and soon we were chatting and laughing like old friends. The next day, I went to her home to make *budin de pan,* Argentina's take on bread pudding.

Budin de pan was originally created when food was scarce and leftovers were not to be wasted. A loaf of day-old bread goes into a blender along with eggs, sour cream, milk, sugar, and vanilla. The custard gets poured over a layer of hard caramel and bakes in a water bath. The final product tastes like a magical mash-up of French toast, cheesecake, and flan, and according to Sofy is best served with coffee and a dollop of dulce de leche.

Khanom Tom (Coconut Balls)

ACTIVE TIME: 45 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 45 MIN

This recipe is all about coconut. First, skip the preshredded stuff (the filling won't hold together with it) and get yourself to the produce department for a fresh one. Look for a coconut with a brown husk (rather than one with a white fibrous exterior, often labeled "young Thai" coconut). Brown-husked coconuts have firmer flesh that's easier to shred.

- **⅓ cup palm sugar or brown sugar**
- **1 tablespoon water plus ½ cup, plus more if needed**
- **1½ cups finely shredded fresh coconut (see Tip), divided**
- **1¼ cups glutinous rice flour, plus more for dusting**

1. Put a large pot of water on to boil.
2. Heat sugar and 1 tablespoon water in a small saucepan over medium-high heat until the sugar has dissolved, 1 to 2 minutes. Add ½ cup coconut and cook, stirring frequently, until the coconut has absorbed most of the syrup and the syrup has darkened, 2 to 3 minutes. (Watch carefully, as it can burn very quickly.) Immediately transfer the caramelized coconut to a bowl to cool.
3. Combine rice flour and the remaining ½ cup water in a medium bowl and knead into a soft dough. It should be slightly tacky but not wet, similar to Play-Doh. If necessary, add water, a tablespoon at a time, to get the right consistency. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest.
4. Dust a work surface with more rice flour. Using about 1 teaspoon each, shape the still-warm filling into 24 balls. Then pinch off a 1-inch chunk of the dough and flatten it into a disk about ¼ inch thick. Place a coconut ball in the center and pinch the dough around it. Roll between your palms to create a round dumpling and seal the seams. Place the khanom tom on the flour-dusted surface. Repeat with the remaining dough and filling.
5. Spread the remaining 1 cup coconut in a shallow dish. Working in 2 or 3 batches, gently drop the khanom tom into the boiling water and cook until they float to the surface, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon to the shallow dish and immediately roll in the coconut. Transfer to a wire rack or plate.

To make ahead: Store airtight at room temperature for up to 1 day. Steam to reheat.

Tip: To shred fresh coconut, use a clean screwdriver or drill to make holes in several of the "eyes" (indentations in the shell). Drain the liquid and reserve for another use. Tap the coconut all over with a hammer until it splits open. (If the coconut does not break easily, bake at 375°F for 20 to 25 minutes. Let cool and tap again.) Pry the coconut meat from the shell with a blunt knife. Peel away the thin brown skin with a vegetable peeler. Shred the coconut meat using a box grater or food processor shredding disk. One coconut yields 3 to 4 cups shredded coconut.

MAKES 20 BALLS: SERVING, 1 PIECE **CAL** 66 **FAT** 2G (SAT 2G) **CHOL** 0MG **CARBS** 12G **TOTAL SUGARS** 4G **PROTEIN** 1G **FIBER** 1G **SODIUM** 4MG **POTASSIUM** 24MG

Ratachanee's Khanom Tom

The Thai island of Koh Phangan is small, just 48 square miles. A single road traces the western perimeter, with most of the island's hullabaloo clinging to its edge. Just off the street, in an area called Srithanu, Ratachanee spends her days munching on betel quid, a similar pastime to the ritual of chewing tobacco, and selling coffee drizzled with sweetened condensed milk.

It is an unhurried life, and one I didn't learn much about. Even with a translator, Ratachanee didn't say a lot. Instead, she showed me how to prepare *khanom tom,* a Thai dessert made from glutinous rice flour, fresh coconut, and caramelized palm sugar, through a series of gestures. As we stood together flattening disks of dough and rolling sticky balls of coconut, I wondered if I was intruding, if I'd asked too much of a stranger who was just trying to live her life.

But as I was getting ready to leave, I turned to thank Ratachanee for her time. She had tears in her eyes and a slight smile on her face. I asked my translator if she was okay, worried something had gone wrong.

After their exchange, the translator turned to me. "Ratachanee says that she is very shy, and that she was nervous about having you here. Then she told me that normally, she has three children. But today, she says, she had four."

To read about how Brooke Siem uncovered a 70-year-old family grudge baked into a birthday cake, scan this smart code with your phone's camera.

Preparing food with others is more than a means to nourishment. It's an expression of love that transcends borders.

THE DINNER DANCE

For many, dinner is more than just a chance to feed the family. Here, an author reflects on how the quiet routine of preparing the evening meal is a welcome connector in her marriage.

BY SUMMER MILLER

I'm cooking two days ahead, but I'm right on schedule. The enchiladas are prepped for tonight. The chicken—the chicken is for tomorrow. Or maybe we'll have leftovers. But probably chicken.

The children set the table—plates, cups, forks, napkins. My back is to the room while I place a 9-by-13 baking dish in the oven.

"Dinner should be ready in about 20 minutes. Why don't you go outside and play?" I say.

They groan.

My son wants to play video games, and my daughter wants to watch people make slime on YouTube. I insist, and the house is quiet for a few minutes until one storms in the front door, hurt in some way by the other's lack of sharing or turn taking or poor negotiation skills.

I exhale, defeated, and tell them to wash their hands for dinner. My husband emerges from the basement wearing his pajamas, because it's 6:30 p.m. and he always changes into pajamas when he gets home. Unless he's going for a run or a bike ride, or if he has to mow the lawn.

We kiss briefly, like old acquaintances being reintroduced at a party, then say the regular things people who've been together for nearly 20 years say.

"How was your day?"

"Good, busy. Yours?"

"About the same."

The children appear, and the enchiladas are nearly ready. I finish cutting wedges of lime, chopping cilantro, and crumbling cotija cheese.

The kids discuss their day. My mind wanders to how I ended up spending my life with Steve, and how we met. We dated for four months, and then I left the country for two months. He picked me up at the airport and took me back to his place, and I never left. That was 18 years ago. Still, we were both sure of the other person. I knew very clearly what

I loved about him, and he knew what he loved about me.

Our first date was the unveiling of our many differences. He was eight years my senior and owned a house. I owned as little as possible. I was urban. He was rural. I was (then) a vegetarian. He was a hunter. I hated guns. He owned four of them. I knew nothing about his world, and everything about him seemed exotic to me. He was unquestionably different from the artists and musicians I often dated. I was nothing like the small-town girls he knew. He had a sturdiness and reliability about him that I loved. He was manly in a way that made me feel safe, but gentle in a way that made me feel cherished. It's still what draws me to him.

The kids clear the dishes. My husband begins to load the dishwasher. I grab a saucepan and fill it with water before putting it on the stove. I set the burner to high and prepare the ingredients for brining the chicken for tomorrow night's dinner. Or maybe the night after. I haven't decided.

Into the pot I toss half a lemon, bay leaf, peppercorns, fennel seeds, thyme, garlic, and equal amounts of sugar and salt. It simmers for a minute or two, steady and just below a boil—that place where heat and tension marry.

I've found many ways to roast a chicken. You can peel back the plastic package, still dripping with the memories of a grocery store cooler, and dust it with salt and pepper. A quick plop in the oven and an hour later you have cooked meat. Many chickens have been made and eaten this way. But that's not how I make chicken, and it's not how you make good chicken.

I take the 5-quart mixing bowl from the cabinet. It once belonged to Steve's mother. I add a few handfuls of ice and pour the seasoned liquid into the bowl. Steam billows, and eventually it's cold enough to submerge the bird. Into the fridge it goes to sit, wait, become infused with the salty, acidic brine.

My husband is nearly done with the dishes. The kids have dispersed to their ends of the house. We try and fail at discussing politics. We try and fail at small talk, mostly because he loves it and I hate it, but sometimes in the quiet spaces of a marriage, the weather is all that needs to be discussed.

We shuffle through our evening routines: showers for the kids, a glass of wine for me, a nip of whiskey for him. He will go to bed early, or I will. It just depends. And tomorrow the day begins again.

I spend my workday in black felt clogs walking the century-old floors of a white converted schoolhouse that doubles as both a test kitchen for recipes I develop and the place where I feed my family. It's a tricky thing to write about nourishment. Trickier still to nourish others when you're hungry.

I bake and style pies and cakes, prepare stuffing for the holiday menu, and make lists upon lists of notes. I dissect flavors and sample slices. I break the dish down and build it up. As the day comes to a close, I write the recipes, wash the dishes, and wipe down the counters.

I take the brined chicken out of the fridge. Just in time for the children to storm the entryway, dropping backpacks and kicking off shoes. My husband walks in behind them.

"How was your day?"

"Good, busy. How was yours?"

I remove the submerged bird, pat it dry, and place it on a baking sheet covered in foil for easy cleanup. The children enter and leave the room. My husband changes out of his work clothes.

I stuff a lemon and some herbs inside the cavity of the chicken and tie it with twine. I use the tips of my fingers to massage olive oil onto the bird and put more herbs under the skin. I am intentional and deliberate. I wash my hands.

He reenters and begins to set the table—plates, cups, forks, napkins. We unpack some missteps and misunderstandings of the past few weeks. I crack pepper over the chicken's surface and sprinkle it with salt and herbs.

I place the bird in a screaming-hot oven and stand still at the counter. My back to the room and to him. My gaze out the window.

He leans in. A hand on my hip. I exhale and turn toward him, our bodies touching briefly. I look down. He kisses my forehead softly, gently. With slight trepidation, he makes a joke. I laugh tenderly, grateful for his ability to break through tension with humor. I lean in too.

Summer Miller is the author of New Prairie Kitchen *and a senior editor at SimplyRecipes.com. She lives with her family in Nebraska.*

COOKING WITH JULIET

A chef recounts how sharing his love of food with his daughter and making her favorite broccoli omelet helped foster joy in the early days of fatherhood.

BY ADAM DOLGE

Of all the major milestones you celebrate as a parent—your baby's first actual, non-gas-induced smiles; wobbly steps; the first time she sleeps through the night—the one that I cherish most has to do with a French omelet I made my 1-year-old daughter for breakfast.

The previous 12 months had been grueling, life-altering, as I struggled with parenthood. Juliet was a crier—in fact, it's still her favorite way of getting her point across now that she's just shy of 2. She's fierce, strong, and deeply independent and I adore her for that. But as an infant, she didn't seem to like anything, including me. I tried my best. I played guitar for her, took her for walks, cuddled with her on the couch, and read her bedtime stories. But nothing seemed to help.

What had I gotten myself into? That frequent thought was one I kept to myself, afraid to share it with anyone, especially my wife. Juliet was our rainbow baby following two pregnancy losses—the first while I was in culinary school and my wife was in her second trimester, late enough for her to have to deliver our first daughter. Instead of coming home from the hospital with our beautiful baby, we were given a box filled with pictures and ultrasounds, pamphlets on grief and how to talk to family about miscarriage, and a teddy bear the identical size of our lost daughter. The second happened before the fetus had formed, so there were no mementos or means of comfort. That time, I was just a few weeks into a new job in Alabama, a thousand miles away from family and friends.

When Juliet arrived, I swore that I would never take her for granted, lose sight of her future, or forget the pain and struggle my wife and I had shared. Still: What had I gotten myself into? Sleep-deprived and lost in an isolated world of ceaseless crying, dirty diapers, bottles, and pacifiers, I found no love of being a father.

But I did have a passion for cooking. As a trained chef, I'm most confident and comfortable working

with food. It's central to my life. To me, there is no greater way to show love than feeding someone.

As Juliet started on solids—not the gray, plaster-like cereals, but actual food—I exposed her to everything. First, the smells and textures. She'd raise an eyebrow in interest after trying raw spinach, gag on slices of tomato, and wiggle with delight biting into corn on the cob. Then the flavors: sautéed carrots with caraway and orange, pecan-smoked chicken with Alabama white sauce (an homage to the state where she was born), and most notably, that omelet, filled with finely chopped broccoli and spinach and a touch of gooey cheese. I set her in her high chair in the kitchen and cooked, talking her through the process like the host of a TV food show.

"See how the egg yolks this morning are bright orange? The color has to do with what the chicken ate."

"Bock! Bock! Bock!" she replied, mimicking the chickens she'd befriended at the local farm.

"Here, taste this Jack cheese; it's a lot milder than cheddar, isn't it?"

"Mmm... more. More!" she squealed.

"Let's put some chives on top. It looks pretty, and the onion flavor complements the rich eggs so well."

"No," said Juliet, spitting out the fistful of chopped herbs she'd shoved in her mouth.

"Sweetie, those are the same chives you pick and eat from our garden."

"Mmm... more!"

We'd finally found a way to connect.

Now that my little girl is an active toddler, her patience for watching me cook has all but vanished. She's too busy chasing our dog and talking to her stuffed animals. But when I'm standing over the stove, if I ever feel a little tug on the back of my pant leg, I'm happy to take a moment, pick up Juliet, and show her what I'm cooking. I hope this early work means she won't be a fussy eater, but my real wish is that she'll carry these memories with her and one day share my love for cooking. Until then, I'll continue to share as many textures and flavors as I can with her, and relish every chance I get to make Juliet an omelet.

Broccoli & Cheese Omelet

ACTIVE TIME: 10 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 10 MIN

This bright-green omelet is a perfect way to get kids to eat their veggies. Finely chopping the broccoli and spinach not only helps them cook faster but also makes them easier (and safer)for toddlers to eat. Have all your ingredients ready next to the stove, because this omelet cooks up fast.

- **2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- **¼ cup finely chopped broccoli**
- **¼ cup finely chopped spinach**
- **1 large egg**
- **1 tablespoon reduced-fat milk**
- **2 tablespoons shredded Monterey Jack cheese**
- **⅛ teaspoon salt**
- **1 tablespoon reduced-fat sour cream**
- **1 tablespoon finely chopped chives**

1. Heat oil in a small nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add broccoli and spinach and cook, stirring occasionally, until bright green and tender, 2 to 4 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, whisk egg and milk in a small bowl. Add the mixture to the pan and stir briefly to combine with the vegetables. Cook, tilting the pan and letting egg run under the edges, until the egg forms a thin, even layer. Continue to cook, reducing the heat if starting to brown, until just slightly wet, 1 to 2 minutes. Sprinkle with cheese and salt. Use a spatula to roll into an omelet. Serve topped with sour cream and chives.

SERVES 1: 1 OMELET **CAL** 244 **FAT** 20.6G (SAT 6.9G) **CHOL** 205.6MG **CARBS** 3.1G **TOTAL SUGARS** 1.4G **PROTEIN** 11.5G **FIBER** 0.6G **SODIUM** 477.8MG **POTASSIUM** 229.6MG **MAGNESIUM** 24.6MG **CALCIUM** 186.2MG **IRON** 1.4MG **FOLATE** 58.8MCG **VITAMIN A** 1829.8IU **VITAMIN C** 20.6MG

DECADENT CAKE RECIPES

BAKING FOR SOMEONE IS AN ACT OF LOVE

A food writer and recipe developer shares how she fell in love with baking.

BY KRISTEN HARTKE

YOU MAY HAVE DOG-EARED PHOTOS of your mom presenting you with a homemade birthday cake, glittering with candles, while you look on, delighted. I do not. My mom was a fantastic cook, but she was also a single mother with a career. When my birthday rolled around, I was perfectly happy to pick out a Pepperidge Farm layer cake from the freezer section at the grocery store.

But when I was 7 years old, I decided that I wanted to bake my mom a cake for her birthday. It was more substantial than drawing a picture crocheting a potholder. I wanted to show her how important she was to me, and in my mind, cakes were meant for the most special people on the most special days.

It was the 1970s in New Haven, Connecticut. One night, when my mom was too tired to cook, she sent me across the street to the drugstore lunch counter to pick up hamburgers for dinner. And it was there that I noticed boxes of devil's food cake mix and cans of frosting. Voilà—for less than a dollar, I could make my mom a "real" birthday cake. I don't remember if it was any good—it was seriously lopsided—but she devoured it.

That moment sparked my love for baking, and for making cakes in particular. Cakes are a canvas, a way for me to honor someone through flavors or decorations. For me, baking a cake is truly an act of love.

Lemon Angel Food Cake with Strawberries & Coconut Cream

ACTIVE TIME: 50 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 3 HRS

Be sure that your tube pan is free from any grease or flour—the batter for this homemade angel food cake needs to be able to climb the sides of the pan.

Cake
- **12 large egg whites or 1½ cups liquid egg whites, at room temperature**
- **1 teaspoon lemon or vanilla extract**
- **½ teaspoon salt**
- **½ teaspoon cream of tartar**
- **1½ cups granulated sugar, divided**
- **1 cup cake flour**
- **2 teaspoons grated lemon zest**

Topping
- **1 (15 ounce) can unsweetened coconut cream, chilled for at least 24 hours**
- **1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar**
- **2 cups sliced strawberries**
- **Candied lemon peel for garnish**

1. Preheat oven to 325° F.
2. To prepare cake: Combine egg whites, lemon or vanilla extract, and salt in a stand mixer fitted with a whisk attachment. Beat on medium speed until frothy, about 1 minute. Sprinkle in cream of tartar and continue beating on medium-high, scraping the sides of the bowl as needed, until stiff, glossy peaks start to form, 2 to 3 minutes. Add ¾ cup sugar, ¼ cup at a time, then increase speed to high and beat until very glossy, about 4 minutes more.
3. Whisk the remaining ¾ cup sugar, flour, and lemon zest in a medium bowl. Gently fold the flour mixture into the egg whites with a flexible spatula until combined. Carefully spoon the batter into an ungreased 10-inch tube pan, smoothing the top.
4. Bake the cake until golden brown and the top just springs back when touched, about 50 minutes.
5. Invert the cake onto a wire rack. (If it has risen above the top of the pan, you may want to invert over a bottle through the hole in the pan so the top of the cake doesn't stick to the rack.) Let cool completely, about 1½ hours.
6. To prepare topping: Spoon the solid chunks of cold coconut cream into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment (reserve any of the clear coconut water that remains in the can for another use). Add confectioners' sugar and beat on high speed, scraping down the sides as needed, until it is the consistency of buttercream. (You can add a couple of spoonfuls of the coconut water if it seems too thick.)
7. To assemble cake: Use a knife to loosen the cake around the edges. Invert onto a serving plate and remove the pan. Serve with the whipped coconut cream, strawberries, and candied lemon peel, if desired.

SERVES 12: 1 PIECE WITH 2 TBSP. STRAWBERRIES & 2 TBSP. COCONUT CREAM
CAL 294 **FAT** 6G (SAT 5.5G) **CARBS** 56.1G **TOTAL SUGARS** 71.7G **PROTEIN** 5.1G **FIBER** 0.9G **SODIUM** 165.3MG **POTASSIUM** 166.1MG **MAGNESIUM** 15.2MG **CALCIUM** 10.6MG **IRON** 1MG **FOLATE** 45.2MCG **VITAMIN A** 3.5IU **VITAMIN C** 16.7MG

Peanut Butter-Banana Frozen Yogurt Cake

ACTIVE TIME: 1 HR
TOTAL TIME: 7 HRS

This grown-up version of ice cream cake is a little sweet and a little salty. The yogurt cake gets its distinct flavor from freeze-dried banana slices—they can be pulverized into a powder (unlike regular dried bananas, which have a chewy texture).

Cake

- ½ cup freeze-dried banana slices
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup white whole-wheat flour
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¾ cup water
- ½ cup canola oil
- ⅔ cup granulated sugar
- 1½ tablespoons cider vinegar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Banana Whip & Frozen Yogurt

- 3 large ripe bananas, cut into 2-inch pieces and frozen for at least 2 hours
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon honey plus 2 tablespoons, divided
- 1 pint low-fat vanilla frozen yogurt

Ganache

- 5 ounces white chocolate, broken into pieces
- ⅓ cup low-fat plain yogurt
- ⅓ cup creamy natural peanut butter
- Chopped salted peanuts for garnish

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Coat a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan with cooking spray. Line the bottom with parchment paper and coat the paper with cooking spray.
2. To prepare cake: Process freeze-dried banana in a food processor until powdered. Sift all-purpose flour, whole-wheat flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together into a medium bowl. Stir in the powdered banana.
3. Whisk water, oil, sugar, vinegar, and 2 teaspoons vanilla in a medium bowl. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and stir gently to combine, being careful not to overmix. Spoon the batter evenly into the prepared pan and smooth the top.
4. Bake the cake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 45 minutes. Let cool in the pan for 10 minutes, then turn out onto a wire rack. Remove the parchment and let cool completely, about 1 hour.
5. To prepare banana whip: Pulse frozen banana chunks in a food processor for a few minutes, scraping down the sides as necessary, until reduced to small pieces. Add vanilla and 1 teaspoon honey; process until it's the consistency of soft-serve ice cream. Spoon the banana whip into a freezer-safe container and freeze for at least 2 hours.
6. To assemble cake: Let the banana whip and frozen yogurt soften at room temperature for 10 minutes.
7. Meanwhile, using a serrated knife, cut a ½-inch layer off the top of the cake. Cut the remaining cake in half horizontally into 2 equal pieces (each about 1½ inches thick). Line the loaf pan with parchment paper and place the bottom layer of cake into the pan.
8. Mash the frozen yogurt in a medium bowl with a fork. Swirl in the remaining 2 tablespoons honey. Spread the frozen yogurt mixture evenly onto the bottom layer of cake. Top with the middle layer of cake, then spread the softened banana whip evenly over that layer. Place the thin cake layer on the banana whip. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and freeze for at least 2 hours.
9. To prepare ganache: Place white chocolate in the top of a double boiler over hot, not boiling, water. Whisk until completely smooth. Remove the top pan from the double boiler. Stir yogurt and peanut butter into the chocolate until smooth. Let cool completely, about 10 minutes.
10. To serve, spread the peanut butter ganache evenly over the top of the cake with an offset spatula. Sprinkle with peanuts, if desired. Cover and freeze until set, about 1 hour.

SERVES 16: 1 PIECE **CAL** 315 **FAT** 13.4G (SAT 3G) **CHOL** 13.4MG **CARBS** 43.4G **TOTAL SUGARS** 41G **PROTEIN** 6.3G **FIBER** 2.1G **SODIUM** 235.4MG **POTASSIUM** 168.5MG **MAGNESIUM** 12.1MG **CALCIUM** 105.8MG

Almond Cake with Pineapple-Rum Filling

ACTIVE TIME: 1 HR 30 MIN
TOTAL TIME: 2 HRS 45 MIN

This cake is a spin on bizcocho mojadito, which is often served at celebrations in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. We made this gluten-free almond cake using a cup-for-cup blend with xanthan gum (try King Arthur Gluten-Free Measure for Measure Flour).

Cake

- 1 cup low-fat plain yogurt
- ½ cup canola oil
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon almond extract
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ⅔ cup almond flour
- 2 cups gluten-free flour blend
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup low-fat milk
- 2 tablespoons brandy or apple juice for brushing, divided

Filling

- 5 cups chopped fresh pineapple
- ⅓ cup rum or orange juice
- 2 teaspoons grated lemon zest
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon chia seeds
- 1 tablespoon light agave syrup
- Pinch of salt

Frosting

- ¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into pieces
- ¼ cup vegetable shortening
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar, sifted
- 1 teaspoon amaretto liqueur or ¼ teaspoon almond extract
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- ½ cup sliced almonds, lightly toasted

1. To prepare cake: Preheat oven to 325° F. Coat two 8-inch round cake pans with cooking spray. Line the bottoms with parchment paper and coat the paper with cooking spray.
2. Whisk yogurt, oil, granulated sugar, almond extract, and ½ teaspoon vanilla in a large bowl. Whisk in almond flour until well combined. Sift gluten-free flour, baking soda, baking powder, and ½ teaspoon salt in a medium bowl. Alternately fold the flour mixture and milk into the yogurt mixture, 3 additions of the flour mixture and 2 additions of milk, until combined. Scrape the batter into the prepared pans, spreading evenly.
3. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 30 minutes. Let cool in the pans for 15 minutes, then turn out onto a wire rack. Remove the parchment and let cool completely, about 45 minutes more.
4. To prepare filling: Combine pineapple and rum (or orange juice) in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to maintain a lively simmer and add lemon zest and lemon juice; cook, stirring occasionally, until the pineapple begins to soften and the liquid is reduced by at least one-third, 5 to 10 minutes. Crush the pineapple with a potato masher. Add chia seeds, reduce heat to low, and continue cooking until the mixture thickens slightly, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat. Stir in agave and salt. Let cool for 1 hour.
5. To prepare frosting: Combine butter and shortening in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment. Beat on medium-high speed until fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add confectioners' sugar, amaretto (or almond extract), vanilla, and salt, beating on low speed and scraping down the sides as necessary, until smooth. Increase speed to high and beat until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes.
6. To assemble cake: Using a toothpick, poke several holes into the top of each cake layer. Place one layer on a serving plate, brush with 1 tablespoon brandy (or apple juice), and spread the pineapple filling evenly on top. Top with the second layer and brush it with the remaining 1 tablespoon brandy (or apple juice). Allow the liquid to soak into the cake for about 10 minutes. Smooth the frosting over the top layer and sprinkle with almonds.

SERVES 16: 1 PIECE **CAL** 333 **FAT** 17.5G (SAT 3.5G) **CHOL** 8.7MG **CARBS** 37.5G **TOTAL SUGARS** 36.3G **PROTEIN** 4.5G **FIBER** 3.8G **SODIUM** 200.2MG **POTASSIUM** 213.5MG **MAGNESIUM** 32.8MG **CALCIUM** 77.8MG **IRON** 1.1MG **FOLATE** 13.6MCG **VITAMIN A** 136.6IU **VITAMIN C** 26.1MG

EatingWell

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Eating for Happiness

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The Spice of Life... and Happiness

Brightly colored tumeric can help you be happy.

BY JESSICA BALL, RD

Whether in a drink, side dish, or main course, turmeric is a flavorful addition to any meal. Compounds in turmeric may help relieve some symptoms of depression. When people with major depressive disorder were given curcumin supplements— extracted from turmeric—for eight weeks, they reported feeling better, and taking curcumin was significantly more effective in improving several mood-related symptoms than was a placebo. Turmeric should be easy to find in the spice aisle of your local supermarket. Bold-flavored and colorful, it's often used in Indian recipes such as curries, dal, tikka masala, and tandoori. Golden milk—a mixture of milk, turmeric, and sometimes sweetener, black pepper, ginger, and cinnamon—has long been part of the Eastern medicine tradition and is now going mainstream in the United States.

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